BEAST WARS
UPRISING

DERAILMENT

BY JIM SORENSON AND DAVID BISHOP

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Part 1 - Drowning in the Depth of the Lethe

V Minus 2.72 Solar Cycles
Resistance Headquarters, Stanix

Amid the chaos of the Grand Uprising, a trio of bots sat around a stacked series of crates that functioned as a makeshift table. B'Boom, who had called the meeting, was gesticulating wildly. Lio Convoy was surprised he managed to stay seated instead of pacing about or, as he'd recently started to do, hanging from the ceiling and shifting his weight from arm to arm. "The damned Alliance keeps pushing and pushing. It's mondo uncool."

Lio Convoy eyed B'Boom calmly. "Now what are they asking for?"

B'Boom pounded his fists together, in his characteristically over-dramatic fashion. "Now they're saying they want the territory from Petrex all the way to Uraya, and all of Kaon."

It was a big ask, but then, the formation of the IPS would potentially end the war in orbital cycles instead of stellar cycles. He steeped his fingers and considered the ramifications. "Blackarachnia?" he prompted.

"Petrex is a non-starter. We've moved our primary logistic trunk for the eastern front there from Petrohex. Kaon is possible, maybe, if they assume the bulk of the fighting there. We only hold about an eighth of the city. Uraya can't be done. We've got units there pushing into Proximax. And I know how bad you want Proximax." Her tone was calm, bordering on icy, with a scratchy edge that always demanded his full attention.

"Offer them Burthov as a southern border," he finally declared after several moments' contemplation. B'Boom and Blackarachnia both started to object, but he cut them off with a half-wave. "I know, I know, it's valuable, nearly as valuable as Petrex itself. But it's a Predacon town anyway, there's a good chance they'd voluntarily join up. And we can shift our operations from there to Petrex and Altihex. I want to keep our foothold in Kaon, but let them know I'm open to renegotiating if they can seize the rest of it within the next, say, orbital cycle. That should light a fire under them. And as for Uraya..."

B'Boom shot up in his seat, straightening his back. "Offer them lower Uraya! They get the energon condensers..."

Lio Convoy nodded. "...which we don't need anyway. Not as long as we've Protihex and Corumkan. Good thinking." He cleared his throat. "And... the other thing?"

Blackarachnia shook her head slowly. "That remains non-negotiable. If the Tripredacus Alliance is to actively join the war, and not merely declare themselves a neutral entity like the Maximal Nation, Preditron has to die. Publicly. And with no hint of their own involvement."

He sighed. "Very well. It's why we rescued him in the first place. Have Ikard handle it, make it appear he chose to participate in the Games. At least the optics of the situation

won't seem quite so macabre." With that unpleasantness out of the way, he called in Cybershark and Psycho-Orb to brief them on the situation at the front. He and Blackarachnia shuffled their chairs around as the tall Maximal strode in, passing B'Boom who was off to make contact and finalize the deal with the Tripredacus Alliance.

Without preamble, Cybershark began. "The Builders remain dug in at Valvolux and Upper Ky-Alexia, despite their severed supply lines. They're stubborn scrappers, sir. Simfur remains contested, though our forces from Rodion and Ibex have dominated the Mithril Sea, so I expect it's only a matter of solar cycles. Our push into Ultrix has met with more success, though they still hold the western half of the city. Their blunder in Lower Ky-Alexia has been a big help with that as well. Builder forces in Kolkular and Kalis remain well supplied—"

Blackarachnia interrupted him. "Start preparing to withdraw from Lower Kalis and focus on Kolkular."

This was a risky stratagem, but Cybershark knew enough not to question it. He'd no doubt heard rumors of the impending alliance with the fledgling Predacus nation-state, and could probably guess at the real reason for the withdrawal.

"Can do, ma'am. I'll get Direwolf on it straight away. Moving north, the Builders have poured inordinate resources into the Maxilla. As long as it stands, they'll still have a foothold on this very plateau. Fighting in northern Vos and western Tesarus remains intense. I think we're looking at another three, maybe four, orbital cycles before we can push into Iacon from that direction under the current political situation." Cybershark subtly stressed the last four words.

Lio Convoy ignored the probe. "I concur. But time is on our side. We control more than 50% of the planet, and the Maximal Nation and IPS another 20% or so. Which brings us to Resistance territory."

All optics turned to Psycho-Orb. "Consolidating our gains remains an ongoing effort. Obviously much of our industrial capacity was destroyed in the fighting, so the parts of Cybertron under uncontested Builder control—"

"There are no parts of Cybertron under *uncontested* Builder control," corrected Lio Convoy firmly.

"As you say," the Predacon said, after the briefest of hesitations. "The parts that have not *yet* experienced active conflict make up a disproportionate fraction of global productivity. Naturally, is partially offset by our population's much lower energy requirements. Protihex remains most productive region, by wide margin." His face was somehow simultaneously impassive and smug as he said this; it was he who brought Protihex into Resistance control, practically without firing a shot, thanks to a combination of his psychic abilities, superb initiative, and no small amount of luck.

"What's the situation with Her Majesty?" asked Blackarachnia.

Psycho-Orb scowled briefly before banishing any hint of emotion from his face. His failure to convince Queen Rage to declare for the Resistance remained a sore spot. "There have been probing attacks in Praxis. I've, how you say, *reallocated* some of our rearguard units. With Shokaract, somewhat more luck we've had. In exchange for acknowledging him as the 'right and proper lord and master of Hyperious,' he has allowed movement through his city for Resistance troops. Nonetheless, the commanders in Harmonex are on alert, should his forces decide become aggressive."

It was not unexpected. Various warlords were taking advantage of the chaos to carve out their own little domains. They'd need to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, once the primary threats of the Builders were neutralized. Lio Convoy leaned forward. "Any update on Carpessa?"

"Nyet." Psycho-Orb was clearly at a loss. "Is unfortunate the satellites were *all* destroyed last stellar cycle, we have no eyes on them at all. But as for communication, is bupkis. Last contact was six solar cycles ago. And, worst of all, we have no idea what is cause. Possibly radiation surge, given their locale. Possibly Builder push, but is odd that they would make the effort, given how isolated Carpessa is. And, in what may be related news, we have lost all contact with Damaxus as of yesterday. Is possible, barely, that this is merely communication issue, but..."

It wasn't. Lio Convoy felt it with great certainly. "No. It's related. And given their proximity to this base, worth an overflight. Arrange it."

Psycho-Orb saluted, a closed fist outhrust from his chest, then he and Cybershark departed. Lio Convoy turned to Blackarachnia. "The Independent Predacus States will change the face of this war. Getting them as active participants could even motivate the Maximal Nation to start grabbing Builder territory."

Blackarachnia smiled slyly. "And you've carefully arranged for their new nation to abut Maximal territory."

His optics twinkled. "You noticed that, did you?"

"You're a dangerous one, LC. I like that." She slunk out of the room, then looked back and threw a wink over her shoulder. He wished he could enjoy the impending entrance of the Tripredacus Alliance to the war, but couldn't shake the feeling that there might be a high price to pay for it. Preditron had been a good and loyal ally, and to betray him felt like yet another betrayal of Lio Convoy's own principles. Each time, he told himself that it was for the greater good, that no sacrifice was too great to throw off the evils of Builder oppression, ignoring the gnawing feeling that he was turning into exactly what he hated about the Builders in the first place. Each time, he wondered when the bill would come due.

He wouldn't need to wonder much longer.

V Minus 0.64 Solar Cycles
Approaching Damaxus

The Rust Sea was choppy. Angry. The storm they were flying through had it churning about even more than usual, and Cybertron's three surviving moons meant that its tides were volatile at best. The storm was, thankfully, abating, though it had been bad enough to delay their recon mission by almost two full solar cycles. Nevertheless, it was still rough flying. Buzz Saw thought to himself that being forced to put down into the violent maelstrom below was probably a fate worse than getting captured by Builders. Subconsciously he increased his altitude.

"I'd be -areful, Saw," came Stormrazor's static-filled narrowcast. "The sea may -ook dange--us but you're statistically -ore likely to get stru-- by lightning." As if to illustrate his point, a bolt flashed through the sky, polarizing the world for a nanoklik.

It worried Buzz Saw that Stormrazor was so perceptive, and he wasn't sure why. Buzz Saw wasn't much for introspection. He tried to redirect the conversation even as he dropped back to his original cruising altitude. "Hey, Stormy," he said, suspecting that his partner hated the nickname despite any evidence, "you keep using big words like that, you're gonna make everyone wonder why you're with the Resistance air force and not locked away in some lab."

"No -un in ge--ing chain-- -- a test tube, Saw." The static was getting worse, raising havoc with their comms.

Fortunately, Damaxus was visible on the horizon now, and fast approaching. In the dusky light, it was apparent that there was activity on the island. A *lot* of activity. Lights darted to and fro, and a green-grey fog covered the island. As they closed, it was apparent that there was some kind of manufacturing being undertaken, as the green-grey smoke bellowed out of many of the huge structures that seemed to dot the island.

"Looks -ike some--ings -oing on down --ere," sent Stormrazor. "But my sen--rs are --ving stra--- -eadings."

This was wrong, all wrong. They were almost close enough to make out individual figures. Each of them seemed to have headlights mounted on their heads or shoulders, accounting for the unusual patterns of illumination. "Hey, Stormy, you ever actually been to *Damaxus* before?"

"Negat---"

"Well, I have. Those ginormous structures, *they're not supposed to be there!* This is bad. We better get back to base." Buzz Saw started to pull into a loop.

"Belay th--. I want -- -et you to conf--m my sens-- sweep. I'm -eadin- no, repeat -o, life signs."

Despite himself, Buzz Saw reversed and did as Stormrazor asked. Sure enough, despite the hundreds—thousands!—of now clearly visible proto-scale Cybertronians bustling about, there were zero active sparks anywhere in the city. For a nanoklik he thought perhaps the storm was interfering, but other readings—heat, energy, auditory activity, radiation, even seismic activity was coming back with data. Damaxus was a ghost town, one seemingly inhabited by real ghosts.

Ghosts who only seemed to have a few body types. He spotted purple bots rolling around mono-wheel style, boxy blue bots with treaded feet, and flying blue robots with thrusters where legs should have been. "Stormy, we *really* need to skedaddle," he implored, even as his PHOTINT package dutifully recorded the visuals.

Stormrazor continued his overflight for a few nanokliks, then narrowcast back, "Yeah, -aw, - -hink you're rig--." Buzz Saw felt his circuits surge with relief as they turned to go.

At that moment, a score of the jet robots abruptly turned to face them, then converted into a jet configuration and rocketed towards them. "We're made!" he yelled, and beat his insecatron wings as fast as he could. At times like this he missed his twin helicopter blades, though even they'd never have been able to outpace these relentless pursuers.

He'd never get away, he realized. They were gaining too quickly. He didn't want to die, had in fact spent much of the war trying to avoid danger whenever he could do so without being obvious about it, but now death had found him.

"Get out -- the storm an- get -hat inf--mation back to Lio Con--y!" sent Stormrazor, as he converted to his humanoid configuration and fired off a series of cryodisks. One, two, three, four of the jets were hit and encased in blocks of ice, diving uncontrollably into the Rust Sea below. Six more continued forward, locked in a tight formation, each unleashing twin streams of white pulses. Several struck home, and Stormrazor began to tumble towards the sea.

Part of Buzz Saw wanted to go back for him. But the larger part just wanted to flee, and so he did. Unfortunately for him, half of the jets had ignored Stormrazor's sacrifice and those ten continued to close with Buzz Saw.

There was no way out. He'd never be able to fight them off, not for more than a cycle or two. He contemplated trying to fly above the storm, so that he might have a shot at transmitting their findings back to base. But they'd doubtless realize his goal and redouble their efforts. Instead, he tried to purge the shame from his self-image subroutines as he transformed and raised his arms in surrender. "Don't shoot! I have vital information about the Resistance."

The jets continued to stream forward, but at least they weren't firing at him. All ten jets converted and surrounded him. Up close, they looked even more bizarre. They weren't Builders, being much closer to Maximal or Predacon in body architecture. But their proportions were all wrong, with a too-narrow waist that made Buzz Saw think of his own pulse wasp form in addition to the absence of legs he'd noted earlier. More disturbingly, they had no real face to speak of, just a single optical strip with a scanning red sensor sweeping back and forth. "Take me to your commander, they'll want to talk. I think you'll find me cooperative."

One of the hovering beings broke from the pack and approached him, even as the others minutely adjusted their positions to close the gap in the ring it left. They were almost geometric in their precision, he noted in some distant corner of his processor. The approaching blue bot raised a clawed hand, chanted "Destroy, destroy!" and thrust it into Buzz Saw's chest, piercing his spark. He shrieked in agony even as he felt two more pairs of clawed hands grab his shoulders from behind so that he wouldn't plummet into the violent sea below.

As the sputtering agony of his every circuit overloading, then being rewritten, engulfed him, his last coherent thought was that, indeed, death in the Rust Sea would have been preferable to this horror.

A short time later, eleven aero drones flew back to the Vehicon stronghold that had once been Damaxus.

V Minus 0.22 Solar Cycles
The Cortex, Thetacon

The tickers were dead. They had been for some stellar cycles now. There was simply no time for feats of athleticism off the battlefield. Even the Games had stopped, the last one interrupted by a bio-attack that was only barely averted. The Cortex had been converted from the headquarters of the Gladiatorial Administration Bureau to yet another military command and control center.

Still, he got to keep his office. That was some small consolation. The Galva Contingency, the use of Lio Convoy's own CNA tempered with the G-Virus to create a new being, had proven costlier and more time consuming than anyone would have liked. Worse yet, once Galva Convoy had been created, it had taken him time to master the Matrix within him. Visions of creating a new army to oppose the growing force of the Resistance seemed perpetually out of reach.

And then, inside the heart of the Builder military apparatus, the Grand Mal, Galva Convoy finally hit his home run. Just a two orbital cycles ago, he had emerged from one of his interminable meditative states and announced that he was ready to create the future, the next generation of Cybertronian… the Vehicon. Not powered by sparks but by anti-sparks, he created the first of his twisted offspring inside one of their blank protoforms. It was an odd looking maroon cycle-based bot, one that balanced precariously on a single wheel.

Eject, wary, asked how many Galva Convoy would be able to make, and was momentarily crushed when he announced that it had taken all of his discipline to create this single specimen. Then the true genius of Galva Convoy's creation became apparent. It proceeded to interface with each of their protoforms in turn, excluding the blanks, and each one became a new Vehicon. There seemed to be three body types: a tank, a cycle, and a jet. Experiments were conducted, limits discerned, but they seemed to be the perfect soldiers; obedient, powerful, fearless. Not as durable as a Maximal or a Predacon, but their ability to colonize other Cybertronians made that irrelevant.

There was a certain… reticence among some elements of the Builders. Hot Rod in particular raised numerous objections, both moral and practical. The Assembly had little time for ethical concerns, but the notion of unstoppable Vehicons running amok in Iacon or its border states gave Eject a certain pause. Despite Galva Convoy's insistence that the Vehicon nanovector simply couldn't work on a Macromaster-scale Builder, due to issues of mass and scale, Eject used his position to add in an extra layer of safeguards. His master-stroke was an absolute prohibition from Vehicon operations north of the arctic circle, built into their fundamental CNA. Though there were a few—vanishingly few—contested cities south of Latitude 66^0, all of the uncontested Builder territory besides backwater Hexima was located in the northern polar region. Only a 2/3rds super-majority vote of the Assembly, 11 of 16, could unlock the ridiculously long string of numbers that would contravene this, Vehicon General Order 66.

With their contingencies in place, battle plans were drawn up. The challenge was getting the Vehicons far enough behind Resistance lines to allow their unique properties to have maximum impact. Eject's many solar cycles of contemplating a Vehicon-plague infecting Builders gave him a brilliant—if hideous—plan. The Assembly ultimately voted 9-7 to infect their own troops with slow-release versions of the nano-plague and allow them to be captured. They would let the Resistance do the hard work of getting the Vehicon plague deep behind their lines.

A group of Micromaster soldiers were given a "combat upgrade package," then shipped to the shores of Lower Ky-Alexia. They were then isolated from their unit due to a "communications breakdown" and allowed to be captured. While the vector spread, silently, a test was carried out in isolated Carpessa; the city fell in less than three megacycles. This was repeated in Damaxus, with similar results. Thanks to the exponential nature of the threat, combined with the mild jamming field each Vehicon generated—a refinement of Lio Convoy's own media-dampening Solipsistic Staff, which Galva Convoy also possessed—neither city was able to get word out before they fell.

And now the time had come; in just over two megacycles, their infected Micromasters would reveal themselves, and the Resistance would be eaten from the inside out. Already, scouts from Carpessa and Damaxus were spreading out to the surrounding regions, though with orders to refrain from initiating hostilities unless discovered until the zero hour.

If he was being honest with himself, it filled him with shame and horror, knowing what he had become. But another part of him hoped that, once the Resistance was crushed, the large number of tireless workers might someday revitalize war-ravaged Cybertron for the benefit of all, Builder and proto-former alike.

His contemplation was interrupted by Zoom Out, one of his two adjuncts, opening an intercom. "Boss, turn on your monitors to frequency ER28-0652, you need to see this."

Static screamed as the monitors attempted to locate the signal, then settled on images of an arena. It took him a moment to realize what he was watching, but when he did he laughed out loud at the irony, a strained sound as much a cry of guilt as an expression of mirth.

The Resistance was running their own Game. With Micromaster POWs.

Infected Micromaster POWs.

The revolution would, indeed, be televised.

V Minus 0.17 Solar Cycles
Harmonex

The tempest of soot-black clouds swirled and yawned. Pale green lightning crackled across the maelstrom, a prowling electric current waiting to find its time to strike at the surface of Cybertron. Magna Stampede could feel the air itself becoming charged.

"Blast it to The Pit and back!" The Maximal's opalescent white armor shimmered in the dim lighting cast by the gates of the local Resistance headquarters. Harmonex was moderately far from the front, but with Shokaract's warmongering just across the Redox River, it paid to stay alert. "If she doesn't get here before the storm front..."

Magna Stampede placed a finger against the side of his crimson red helmet. "Soundbite, has she radioed in yet? This isn't like her."

Soundbite's lingering bestial voice slithered throughout Magna Stampede's audio receptors.

Magna Stampede rolled his optics and pressed the side of his helmet again. "Would you do me a favor and transform out of beast mode? You know I'm not used to these other...vocal cavities yet. I can't understand a word you're saying."

Soundbite met the request with a hiss. It was trailed by a series of ticks and clicks, then she spoke again. "I said... It's *exactly* like her. And failing to call in, that's just standard operating procedure as well."

The Predacon carnosaur was right; Stockade was always late and never followed procedure. She had been a common street thug before she joined the Resistance, in and out of jail, always looking to pick a fight and end disputes with her fists. Magna Stampede had his suspicions that was why Longhorn had made her his partner. As a member of the Magna Heritage, Magna Stampede was forged for dedication and loyalty. He was raised on stories told of his great aunt Pyra and her missions into the Rust Sea. He was steadfast, trustworthy, and timely...

Still none of that had worn off on Stockade.

A brilliant emerald flash lashed out from one of the ashen plum-colored clouds above. The echoing thunder reverberated through the ground and Magna Stampede felt a temporary boost in his reserve energy cells as electricity from the blast snaked through Cybertron's metal crust and made its way through his exostructure. He began to fret even more.

And then, though it was his duty to guard the gates, he felt a surge of valor that refused to be ignored. "Soundbite, get Triceradon out here. I can't just... She's..." Magna Stampede cleared his robotic vocalizers. "It's my obligation to protect my partner."

"I'll send her right out." Soundbite reported monotonously, then her typically scaly voice began to glow with warmth. "Go find our wayward warrior."

Magna Stampede let out an involuntary whinny as he jumped in the air. His body shifted until it landed on four hooves. The golden horn in the center of his equine forehead gleamed, and his meaty metal calves propelled his legs forward at a thrilling speed.

It had gotten dark outside. Rather, the artificial lights in the city had all gone dark. With the cold easterly wind blowing in from Damaxus, Magna Stampede assumed that the circling storm had finally pried loose some important power circuit somewhere.

Suddenly a clatter came from behind him. Magna Stampede spun but all he could see was a dark alley, and all he could hear was the howling zephyrs born from the gale.

"You're jumping at the wind," the Maximal muttered to himself. He pulled out a holopad and swiped at the screen with his index finger until an image of Stockade came up in view. Her elegant indigo chest piece curved up past her shoulders, framing her gold face. To most it would have looked as though it was completely devoid of emotion, but Magna Stampede could see her smile. It was slight and subtle and there just for him.

Magna Stampede looked up to see a silhouette in a different backstreet. His desperation urged him to call out. "Hey! Hello! Have you seen this bo-"

He stopped dead in his tracks. His words refused to leave his vocalizer. There in the alleyway in front of him, the silhouette became fully apparent. It was a bot, sure—its cobalt and cerulean armor glinted what little light dared to creep out into the darkness—but it was missing its legs. Instead, its body ended in two long jet-like tail fins. Its head snapped towards Magna Stampede and it raised one of its talon-like hands at the Maximal. "Seek. Locate," it intoned soullessly.

"Uhm. Never... Never mind. I'll go ask somewhere else." Stepping back in retreat, Magna Stampede bumped into something behind him. He spiraled to face two more of the hovering robots, both as foreboding as the first, all three of them disconcertingly identical down to the smallest detail. "Are you the Builders' work? How did you get this deep into Resistance territory? Did you... The power outage...?"

The three glowing red optical strips did nothing to give a response, they simply stared back at him for a moment, then their shoulders began to glow ominously. "Destroy." The weapons fired, and he found himself dodging three pairs of deadly white bolts.

"Very well." The Maximal locked his footing, balanced his weight, and withdrew the massive battle ax from its moorings on his back. "If it's a fight you want, I am a guardian and more than ready to give you it."

A smooth swing of the ax delivered a deadly blow to the one drone. Magna Stampede used the momentum of the weapon to pirouette and face the hovering jet drone behind him, but it was too late. The robot unleashed twin streams of energy from its shoulders. Magna Stampede managed to dodge one, but the second smashed dead center into his chest and sent him careening off of his feet. As he hit the ground, he tried to send off a distress call, but found that there was a low-level jamming field emanating from his attackers. For some reason this worried him more than their mere presence. Thinking quickly, he fired a flare into the air, and hoped that someone at base was looking up into the dark night.

The third drone reached behind one of the wings jutting from its back and retrieved a glowing red blade that snapped to full length with a flick of the robot's wrist. The drones' talons edged closer, ready to grab hold of Magna Stampede, and the tip of the red sword pointed at his spark chamber. "Destroy, destroy."

An indigo blur crashed into the robots. Magna Stampede's optics fluttered online to see Stockade standing above him. He smiled, "You're a sight for sore opt —"

"Don't even start with the scrap, Magna. What the Pit are you doing here, messing with my patrol?" Stockade grabbed her partner around his shoulders. "Don't say 'looking for me.'"

"Uhm..."

"Well?"

Magna Stampede gritted his teeth behind his grin. "You said not to say..."

There was that subtle smile again. Or it was a subtle frown. Magna Stampede cursed at himself. Pit, why did he have to find her emotional distance so entrancing?

Stockade lifted Magna Stampede from the ground, but then stopped. Her head slowly turned and her yellow optics looked down at her partner's face. They began to quiver.

Magna Stampede fell from Stockade's arms, the heft of his body armor hitting the street in a clamor. From where he landed, he glanced up at Stockade. Her optics quivered once more, then started to fade black. A red blade stuck out of the front of her chest; its glow pulsed rhythmically. It took Magna Stampede a moment to realize the pulse was actually that of her life spark; the sword had punctured her spark chamber and the luminescent energy orb within was exposed.

The cobalt drone withdrew its sword and plunged its hand into the open chamber. She screamed in agony and collapsed to her knees. Magna Stampede hefted his vibro-scythe and hurtled it into her assailant. It was knocked back a few microhics, then collapsed in a lifeless blue heap before exploding.

"Are you alright?" he asked her, knowing in his spark that she couldn't be.

Incredibly, she struggled back to her feet. "Yeah, maybe. I think I might—" then she convulsively clutched at her still-exposed spark chamber with both hands and let out a small, pained grunt. Her optics blacked out, then reignited a blazing scarlet. Her curvy indigo and gold body tore open, being replaced with massive blocky mustard and maroon heavy armor.

Magna Stampede shuddered as he picked up one of the defeated blue jet things, the only one with a glimmer of light left in its optics. "What... What did you do to her? Bring her back! Bring. Her... Back..."

It cocked its head at him. "Destroy. Destroy." Its mangled shoulder cannons powered up, but the damage was too great; they exploded, knocking Magna Stampede from his feet, his steel hands still clutching fragments of the drone.

Stockade was still fighting, still making loud noises of agony. A gigantic energy cannon lurched free from her back, coming to rest over her shoulder. "Fight it," he implored from where he lay on the ground, "whatever this, this infection is, you've got to fight it."

Her optics found his. "It hurts so much," she whimpered. She grimaced as her gray-blue legs peeled away, revealing charcoal black treads. At this point, only her head remained... her.

"Don't worry, I won't leave you. We'll beat this, together," he promised, even as the contours of her head began to change. Then the unmistakable whine of missiles flying through the air filled his optics, and he found himself lifted off the ground and hurtled several microhics back. His optics cut out. When they rebooted, Stockade too had collapsed, shrapnel riddling her body, but there was a scintillation in her visor yet. Two Predacons and a Maximal stood over the bodies. The whole scene was soaked from the rain that had finally started to fall.

The burgundy, yellow, and lime green Predacon gestured at Stockade. "We've got two live ones, CatSCAN, a friendly and a hostile."

The white and red Maximal approached, then probed at the wound on Magna Stampede's chest. "I have seen worse when I was forced to fight in the Games. I can fix you."

"Fix... Her..."

CatSCAN turned to Stockade. "Her? The tank creature?"

"Not... creature. My... partner."

"Fascinating." His tone was machine-like, even for a mechanical lifeform, and eerily reminiscent of the jet things. He turned to examine her, and Magna Stampede thought he could hear her moaning faintly. A red scan swept her form. "Her spark has been corrupted. Perhaps in time we can cure such affliction."

Magna Stampede held out his arm towards the drone that used to be his partner. "Please... save... her."

"Improbable. However, this does present an opportunity. I shall extract her spark to better understand the contaminants. With study, it may lead to a treatment." A blue syringe whirred from within CatSCAN's forearm. "First, though, I must attend to you."

"Extract... spark?" The guardian flailed his arms, a futile effort in trying to push the Maximal medic away. "Isn't that... fatal?"

CatSCAN jabbed the tip of the syringe into Magna Stampede's hydraulics. "Most probably, yes."

"Nooo! She's still… online! She's still alive!" The white and gold Maximal arched his back to look at Stockade, to take in her image one more time. He screamed and flopped in rage. "You can't… do that! She's still there… She's still alive!"

CatSCAN pushed the plunger on the syringe. Magna Stampede's vision began to narrow as his world waned to white. His words trailed off as his slipped into stasis.

"She's…"

"…still…"

"…alive…"

V Plus 0.02 Solar Cycles
Resistance Headquarters, Stanix

Resistance HQ had been relocated several times as Resistance fortunes had waxed and waned. Mostly waxed. They had only recently moved to Stanix from Petrex, to concentrate on dominating the Hydrax Plateau and use it as a base to push past the Maxilla into Iacon. As such, the facilities weren't as sophisticated as they had been in Petrex, or Polyhex before that.

Nonetheless, Lio Convoy still found it valuable to make time for the consumption of every available scrap of media the Resistance could scrounge. With the satellite network destroyed by the last action of the *Gung-Ho* before Slammoth seized command, they were limited to unreliable shortwaves, robust but scarce hardline cables, and prohibitively expensive tachyonic relay transmissions.

It was still a deluge of material. The Builder's propaganda network, the innocuously-named Iacon Communication Service, had been the loudest voice for stellar cycles, though his own Radio Free Cybertron had finally gotten enough resources to compete on equal footing. As important as RFC was, it was where Lio Convoy paid the least attention during his sessions. He was more interested in the information that was being generated by others. The Maximal Nation had recently managed to get their own network up and running, Voice of Maximals, and untangling what was propaganda from what was genuine had proved challenging. The Maximal High Council had learned fast, and the VoM director, a fellow named Optimal about whom they had very little intelligence, was very good at his job. The rest of the signals were local broadcasters of all stripes, reporting on what they saw, urging the Resistance or the Builders or whichever faction to action, or even just playing music and telling stories.

Suddenly, his attention turned back to the RFC broadcast. They had been showcasing the new Games down in Protihex, and something had been out of place. At first he thought it was lingering guilt at the presence of Preditron in the conflict, but then he realized that wasn't it. With dawning horror, he watched as a new element revealed itself, Builder-machines in protoform-based bodies that were rewriting the CNA of everything they touched, building more of themselves. He did the math and realized how horrifically vulnerable they were, how few genuine fighters were anywhere even close to Protihex. If the threat wasn't contained, and contained fast, their entire territory would be at risk.

He was halfway out of his seat when Psycho-Orb burst in to his chamber. "Sir, recon mission has failed to report back. I would like the permission to—"

Psycho-Orb was shoved aside as B'Boom entered the increasingly crowded chambers. "Yo, got some strange news out of Harmonex, and... boss, you OK?"

Lio Convoy was definitely not OK. His processor was putting all of the pieces together. Carpessa. Damaxus. The too-easy capture of lower Ky-Alexia and the resulting POW surge. It was all related. The Resistance was under a massive exponential assault. Their window to shove the genie back into the bottle was closing with terrifying rapidity.

"War council. Three cycles. We are on the edge of annihilation."

V Plus 0.30 Solar Cycles
Proximax

"Hey Stiletto, you got a visual?" Snapper asked, looking left and right down the deserted street but seeing nothing.

Circling high above, in DeathEagle mode, Stiletto could see for several blocks in each direction, "Nothing yet," she reported, "Watch your stations."

Snapper heard a loud bang, followed by weapons fire to the west, and whirled round. "Damn it, who's firing?"

"Just us!" Crazybolt told him, "Bazooka's hit, the target laid a proximity mine in a fragging web!"

Snapper shook his head, "Watch out, okay? The area is still crawling with civvies." As soon as his comms shut off he heard an explosion behind him and saw a great plume of red-brown dust rise into the air.

"Coming your way Snapper!" Magmatron confirmed, "I'm—we're, in pursuit." Snapper had already seen their target, a green and purple bot with a black domed head and an

array of twitching appendages on his back. He was sprinting in humanoid mode, straight for Snapper. Glancing around and seeing the worried optics of close to a dozen civilians peering out of windows and doorways, Snapper resolved to finish this with as little collateral damage as possible. "Beast mode," he said, shifting into his chelonoid form and dropping into a crouch. "COME ON!" he roared to the running figure, but before he could leap in for the tackle, the other robot raised his wrist and something sprayed out of it. The web gummed up Snapper's optics and he crashed to the ground, empty handed. "Damn it! He's past me!"

"I'm still on his tail," Magmatron rumbled, and Snapper, temporarily blinded, could hear the pounding of his heavy saurian footsteps as he thundered past. "He's fast though! Where are the Constructicons?"

"Never fear guv," was Buckethead's typically irreverent response. "The cavalry's… well, not 'ere, per se, but, you know. Almost."

"It's one bot!" moaned Snapper, "He's making us look like amateurs."

"We are amateurs!" Crazybolt chimed in cheerfully.

"Talented amateurs," agreed Bazooka. Snapper was relieved that whatever damage the pilot had sustained wasn't serious enough to blunt his spirit. He took vicarious pleasure in the obvious affection Bazooka and Crazybolt had for each other.

"It's one bot *that we know of*," Stiletto warned from high above. "And he's very good, that much is clear from the stunt he pulled at the D.E.D. plant."

"Yeah but so are the Ex-Bots!" crowed Bazooka. Magmatron just sighed.

Snapper managed to clear the gunk off his faceplate in time to see the Constructicons round the corner in vehicle mode, led by Buckethead. In the stellar cycle or so they'd been fighting to keep civilians and non-combatants safe from the ever-escalating war between Resistance and Builders, she'd come to supplant Hightower as team leader. It agreed with her, somehow, in a square-chip-in-a-round-socket kinda way.

"Right," said Buckethead, "Leave this chancer to us." Their engines revved as they formed a semicircle around the fleeing figure, "Oi, you've got nowhere to go. I'm afraid you're nicked, Sunshine…" she paused, "Oh bearings."

"What?" Stiletto asked anxiously.

"He's only gone and turned into a fragging spiderbot and scuttled up a fragging building, for frag's sake! You want us to do our party piece?"

Long Haul transformed to humanoid mode and pumped a fist. "Yeah, let's squash us a spiderbot!"

Magmatron cut in. "Belay that!"

"Agreed," Stiletto said, "There are way too many civilians, these people don't have much left, you can't go full Devastator on them!"

"Sorry your worship," Buckethead responded, "got a mite carried away. What's the new plan?"

Stiletto continued to circle. "OK," she said, "everyone fan out and keep a watch on the ground, I'm going to run a sweep from up here. Magmatron, if you could assist? If we find him up high, I'll send him your way, you do the same."

Buckethead nodded curtly and thumbed her comms, "All right sweethearts," she said to the Constructicons, "You heard the birdie, move your skids." They started to move out as the winged third of Magmatron's jurassanoid form took to the air.

Just then, static hissed through all their comm units at once. "Sorry Ex-Bots!" came the reedy whine, "But you'll have to do better than that."

"Eurgh!" Magmatron shook his big jurassanoid head, "How is he doing that?"

"He was some kind of genius Pred scientist," Crazybolt told him, "He's probably got a gizmo."

"Yeah, or a... thingummy," Bazooka quipped, then gasped in obvious pain from his injury, "Stop with the technobabble, I can't take it. This guy's worse than Delirious."

"Who?" asked someone on the channel.

"Rogue genius AI from Metascan Omega," explained Bazooka, "took one of our shipmates apart and put him back together as a metal puppet."

"Cut the chatter!" Stiletto told them, "We've got incoming!"

"Ah yes," the intrusive voice, somewhere between shriek and chuckle, came back in, "My backup—thoroughly Robo-Smashed and fresh from Bastion-three, sorry about that."

There was a bellowing roar from a building they had thought abandoned. The double doors burst open and flew into the street, revealing the black and white form of another jurassanoid.

"Grimlock," said their target, "Kill them."

The newcomer's huge jaws lolled open as he spoke, "Me Grimlock obey Tarantulas! Me Grimlock SMASH EX-BOTS!"

"Oh frag," said Snapper, "Not him."

The street was pandemonium. Every member of the Ex-Bots was trying desperately to grapple with Grimlock's savage, biting, clawing form. Crazybolt was down with his arm torn open. The Constructicons were falling over each other to attack or retreat, seemingly simultaneously, and Snapper appeared paralyzed by his former Resistance comrade's appearance. The Autobot-turned-Maximal-turned-Resistance-turned-terrorist was fighting with the strength of ten bots, and Stiletto could not give any useful advice as she

swooped this way and that looking for Tarantulas. *Oracle but I wish Rampage was here,* she thought, but he wasn't. He had been off for a decacycle now, on a personal mission he obviously found important but would not share with any of his friends. *Friends.* An uncomfortable word as applied to him.

"That does it!" Buckethead roared, "Constructicons, u..."

"NO!" barked Magmatron, "You'll level the block. Pour it on, he'll go down." But he didn't. Grimlock tossed his beast head and threw Crazybolt into a doorway choked with Maximal civilians. He apologized and tried to get back up, but his equilibrium circuits gave out and he crashed back down onto his skidplate.

"Hold him!" Stiletto yelled, "I've got optics on Tarantulas! In pursuit!" She could not help but give a DeathEagle cry as she wheeled round and bore down on the spindly form, currently crouched at the top of a tall and rickety-looking fire suppression unit. "Give it up, webhead!" she told him.

Webhead, really? Overshoot asked in her head, but she told him to shut up. Their connection had grown stronger over the past stellar cycle. He no longer needed to invade her memory to communicate.

Tarantulas resumed humanoid mode and started to make ready to jump. He turned and, cackling, fired a volley of black darts at her. She banked sharply and they went either side, then replied with her own missile, which detonated the top of the tower and washed the ex-Predacon scientist off the building in a torrent of fire-retardant foam. He laughed as he plunged out of sight.

Her sensors caught movement in a narrow alley behind the fire station. She transformed to humanoid mode mid-air and landed in a crouch. Tarantulas had tried to go to ground again, but she could track him by the wet trail he was leaving. She engaged her stealth pack and slotted a throwing dagger into each hand. Behind her she could still hear the sounds of battle as the rest of the team tried to pin Grimlock down. She forced herself to ignore it and concentrate on her quarry.

There was a rustle of movement to her right and she dodged just in time to avoid three of Tarantulas' envenomed barbs as they sped past her. She answered with a dagger which lodged in his shoulder where it sat, sparking. He just carried on chuckling to himself.

"It's too late bird-bot," he told her, "By my calculations, the Robo-Smasher I salvaged from the old MCSF headquarters in Iacon should be fully powered by now. Even better, you Ex-Bots have no idea where I've hidden my little 'consolation prize.' By now, half of Proximax will be under my thrall."

Stiletto cocked her head on one side, "Oh really?" she asked, "Humor me though; what if that Robo-Smasher had to be triggered by remote, and what if we had been jamming your frequency since before we arrived?"

His optical visor narrowed, but he did not say anything.

"That's right Tarantulas, we do our homework." *Also I'm in fairly frequent communication with a ghost who may be omniscient or if not, knows someone who is.*

Their stand-off was interrupted by a shout from Buckethead, "The slippery soddin' blighter's on the move again!" Stiletto heard thunderous footsteps and could only half-turn before Grimlock cannoned into her from the side. She felt herself lifted up, striking the alley wall hard.

"Good boy, Grimlock!" Tarantulas cackled, "Ex-Bots, I hope you enjoyed your time with my pet. He's been ever so faithful, ever since I liberated him from the Builders."

Stiletto braced to fend off another blow, but Grimlock did not move. Instead the triangular optics of his black and white beast mode were focused on Tarantulas, who looked worried. Tarantulas touched a few buttons on a control panel in his forearm, but Grimlock did not move. Tarantulas started to back away as Grimlock growled.

"No!" the Predacon scientist wailed. "No! You were mine, I control you!"

Grimlock's voice changed, becoming lower, more dangerous, "Me Grimlock obfuscating." Tarantulas' mandibles went wide with shock as the huge jurassanoid charged, grabbing him round his narrow waist and dashing him to the stained alley floor in a spray of sparks and mech-fluid.

When the rest of the team had picked themselves up and located Stiletto and Tarantulas, it was over. Tarantulas was in stasis cuffs, babbling to himself and Grimlock was sitting quietly. When Stiletto said he would have to come with them, he did not resist.

As Magmatron commenced hauling the renegade Predacon away he fixed Stiletto with a fierce, mad look. "It's coming, you know," he said, "if you hadn't been dealing with me, you'd have seen it already, the apocalypse is here, madness I could only dream of." He fell to the ground, laughing, until Magmatron offlined him with a single blow.

Stiletto sighed, letting herself relax as the combat high drained from her system. *He might be mad as a turbo-hatter,* Overshoot said, *but he's got a point—you and your friends need to find a working public broadcast system, now. You're going to be needed, first in Proximax, and then in Nova Cronum.*

V Plus 0.57 Solar Cycles
Over the Sonic Canyons North of Protihex

Resistance transport ZN-4720, aka the *Star Dasher*, had barely stopped moving since the initial attack in Protihex.

"It's confirmed," Cheetor said, dully, turning away from the communications console. "Those things are everywhere, all over our rear echelons. ICS is calling them 'Vehicons.'"

He paused a moment to let his companions absorb this information. Ser-Ket's wings drooped along with her face as she took it in. Preditron's optics burned a furious red, but his faceplate remained impassive.

"So what do we do?" Autojetter called from the cockpit. "The *Dasher* lost an engine in the fight, but he has enough fuel to limp along in the air for another three megacycles. Maybe four. Where do you want me to take you?"

"Should we go back?" Ser-Ket's eyes were on Preditron. "Take the fight to them?"

Preditron's huge red and gold body shifted in his seat and he gave a wan smile. "Your attitude does you credit, my child," he told her gently, "but engaging in a fight that cannot be won is not valorous. It is merely suicide."

"Plus," agreed Cheetor, "none of us are exactly Lio Convoy's favorite bots at the moment."

Preditron waved that sentiment away as though it was of no concern. "I have lived through many decades and many attempts on my life, and met each as they have arrived. However, if this plot continues in the wake of the present catastrophe then Lio Convoy is not as clever as I know he is."

"Yeah well," Cheetor retorted, "That's as may be, but have you considered that Resistance bureaucracy might still be in shock from these attacks? Even if LC has decided to let you off the hook, it doesn't mean that the APB has necessarily been rescinded all over."

Preditron nodded sagely. "You may be right," he said, "One day I will seek to meet again with Lio Convoy, and then we shall see what we shall see, but that is for another time. Here and now, I am open to suggestions."

"Okay," Cheetor hesitated, "But don't get mad."

Ser-Ket cocked a brow-ridge in confusion. "What?"

"The Maximal Nation."

Preditron's wan smile returned, and Ser-Ket hissed, "Maximals? We should flee to be among… Maximals?" she drew the last syllable out, then looked at Cheetor and was slightly embarrassed. "Preditron and I should seek our own kind."

Preditron stood up, his height forcing his head to bow in the cramped compartment. "You forget," he told her, "Lio Convoy has no quarrel with me. He sought to fulfil the wishes of the Tripredacus Alliance. We would be under attack as soon as we stepped off the transport."

"We would kill those traitors!" Ser-Ket exclaimed, fervor burning in her optics.

He clapped a huge hand on her shoulder. "Of that I have little doubt," he said. "Note, I said, 'under attack,' not 'killed.' Nonetheless, I do not feel it would be a practical move in these times."

"That a decision?" Autojetter asked nervously from the cockpit. "Scopes have just picked up some more of those jet things and I think if poor old Star Dasher could speak, he'd agree with me that we should be elsewhere."

Cheetor looked at Preditron, who nodded, "OK," he told Autojetter, "Let's do it. Set a course."

V Plus 0.83 Solar Cycles
Over Protihex

It was harder than he thought it would be, watching Jeepers leap out of their modified Autobot bomber, and Movor thought it would be hard.

"At least it's raining," Jeepers had said, false smile plastered on his square face as he leapt out the hatch and converted. Jeepers always had appreciated rainy days.

That was two megacycles ago. Soon it would be Movor's turn.

"You better get ready back there!" shouted their pilot, a yellow feathered Maximal called Eagle Killer. The din of their captured vessel drowned out anything short of a yell.

"Already?" he shouted back, "I thought we still had five cycles!"

"Five cycles till optimal, yeah, but we've got incoming and may have to launch short of target. Shouldn't matter too much, considering… considering." *Considering your blast radius* was what the pilot didn't say, the words left unspoken, hanging between them.

Movor felt his internals lurch, and it wasn't entirely from the turbulence. The Autobot who had once been called Dreadrock, and was now a mindless Resistance vessel, was a bumpy ride under ideal circumstances, and this was about as from ideal as possible. Protihex had come to the Resistance nearly intact, and represented something of a safe haven for Maximals and Predacons alike. To bomb it was nearly unthinkable.

Nearly.

He thought back to the day he'd volunteered. Lio Convoy had walked the lines, asking for crack troops willing to sacrifice everything they had, everything they were, to give the Resistance an edge. "You will be the last line of defense for the Resistance, a threat so terrible that even the Builders will hesitate to unleash their arsenal from the Forever Vaults." He and his fellow Commandos under Mega-Dolrailer had been the first to raise their hands. Only Jeepers had hesitated.

Jeepers.

Jeepers, who, as a result of *Operation Amputation*, was now so much radioactive dust, along with the entire city that had once been called Damaxus. A city that had been in

Resistance hands for over two stellar cycles, and was just starting to rebuild. The threat that had Resistance command so spooked had better have been worth it. Vehicons, as they were called, were an 'exponential threat,' according to Blackarachnia, that 'had to be cauterized at the source.' Movor had his doubts that anything could be worth bombing their own territory.

"Contact with hostiles in ten nanokliks!" shouted Eagle Killer.

The *Dreadrock* lurched unpleasantly. Movor hadn't thought it possible the flight could become bumpier, but it did. The sharp crack of an explosion heralded a sudden onrush of wind that howled through the hold of their bomber. The jagged wound in the side of the hull looked debilitating, but at least gave him the opportunity to see the battle with his own optics. He could see that the nearest engine had been hit and exploded, though the far engine on the starboard side was still functional. This was a six engine craft, and could survive the loss of any three. Blue jets flitted about, unleashing barrages of white fire before pulling up, avoiding the *Dreadrock*'s larger but clumsier guns.

"Can't hold 'em off much longer," informed Eagle Killer. "We're still 120 hics from target but I think you'll have to launch now." With that, the enormous hatch in the floor of the *Dreadrock* groaned to light, lifting up infinitesimally and sliding inward.

Still, Movor just stared at the rapidly-moving terrain below him. When he'd volunteered to become a superweapon, he'd thought they'd be turned into a combiner or a Pretender, something of the sort. This… this wasn't what he'd had in mind. Mega-Dolrailer had been too large for the process, but the rest of them were just perfect. Now Jeepers was gone, and presumably Dangar as well; he'd seen the *Wing Saber* take off west, for Carpessa. Only Ro-Tor was left of the four modified Commandos, held in reserve by Lio Convoy and the rest of the Resistance High Command. In case they needed to wipe out another city, presumably. *Or worse*.

"If you're gonna jump, jump now, I can't keep her in the air much longer!"

That was the question, wasn't it? To launch or not to launch. To be or not to be.

Damn it, he was a Maximal. Wholesale slaughter wasn't in his source code. His kind sought ways to find common ground with their enemies, gave others the benefit of the doubt. The one consolation when he'd undergone the procedure was the hope that, with four K-Bombs in reserve, the Resistance need never use them. And now he was to be deployed against Protihex, the beacon of the Resistance? No, he wouldn't. Not because he couldn't bear to sacrifice himself, he'd committed to that idea even before his painful modification. But this was wrong. The Vehicons would just have to be dealt with just like any other enemy, street-by-street, hand-to-hand. He'd tell Lio Convoy personally why he refused to deploy, and the Resistance supreme commander would have no choice but to—

The *Dreadrock* rocked again, and Movor felt his gyros lurch. They'd lost altitude. The ground was even closer. He could make out towers, warehouses, roads, factories… but no

Maximals, no Predacons. Below him, all he saw were the strange-looking tank and cycle robots, scurrying about with a chilling uniformity. *Vehicons*. He watched them swarm a struggling grey/green mech and hold it down and then saw it start to mutate into another one of them.

These weren't people. These were something else. Something else. Something monstrous. Something more evil than all of the slights and indignities the Builders had ever heaped on his people.

As if in a trance, Movor stepped forward and found himself plummeting, the inexorable force of gravity pulling him down. He found himself missing his old shuttle mode, but his new mode was far more potent.

He converted into his K-Bomb configuration and felt himself arm. That part wasn't entirely under his control; Lio Convoy had armed him personally, at a level 9. Jeepers and Dangar had only been primed to a 4, but then, Carpessa and Damaxus were much smaller than Protihex.

As he fell, he perceived the *Dreadrock* pulling up, imagined Eagle Killer desperately attempting to escape the blast radius. His radar displayed the unnatural jets closing in, holding formation to the end. He saw the ground, three nanokliks away, two, one.

The explosion tore a new hole in Cybertron's crust, annihilating hundreds of thousands of Vehicons and the 93 Maximals and Predacons in the blast zone that had, against all odd, managed to survive the Vehicon Apocalypse for nearly a day.

V Plus 0.86 Solar Cycles
Resistance Headquarters, Stanix

The entire Resistance leadership, along with a number of specialists, had gathered in the commissary, which was functioning as a makeshift war room. They were there to observe the effects of *Operation Amputation*. Damaxus was the first city they bombed, followed less than a megacycle on by Carpessa. Now only Protihex remained. They waited to see if they'd acted swiftly enough. When Lio Convoy first proposed cauterizing all three cities, without delay, only Cybershark immediately acquiesced. Every other member of High Command objected to varying degrees. Lio Convoy gave each, in turn, the opportunity to give voice to their opposition, listening to each one calmly. B'Boom had been the most adamant, wanting to pursue CatSCAN's theory that cyber venom could arrest the Vehicon reformatting. But there was no time, and too much at stake. He declared that their concerns would be on the record, but that he was going to proceed with the plan.

When the images of the complete and utter eradication of Damaxus and Carpessa came in, transmitted by coded shortwave, Lio Convoy forced himself to not look away. It was difficult. The two cities had a combined population of eighty thousand. That some 99% of the population had already perished was some consolation, but less than reason alone might suggest.

Grieve later, he told himself, even as he offered sympathy to Ro-Tor, the last member of the Commandos. Now was the time for action. By now every unit commander would have received word of the new threat, and would make the eradication of any Vehicon—that was what ICS was calling them in their gloating broadcasts, and it seemed as good a name as any—their number one threat. He was tempted to pull his troops off the front lines, but worried that allowing the Builders to regroup would only embolden them. It had now become more imperative than ever that the Builder threat be quashed once and for all.

"#incomingsignal," said a tech. A static-filled image blinked onto the screen of Protihex as seen from the air. From the way it jinked about it was clear that the bomber transmitting the image was under heavy fire. Vehicon jets flitted about.

"Can you clear up the Pit-damned image?" demanded Blackarachia.

"#jammedatthesource #thisisharderthanitlooks," replied the blue-white Maximal, who had adopted an arcti-avianoid form for some reason.

Poor transmission or no, to see Protihex spread out below, horribly vulnerable, caused his boron compressor to fill uncomfortably. He made a conscious effort to void it. "Analysis: are they on target?"

Another specialist, a red armodrillo called Bump, crowded closer to the screen. "Negative. They appear to be some 200 hics northwest of the ideal drop zone."

B'Boom leapt out of his chair. "Dude, we need to abort! From that position they'll blow up Nuon, and maybe parts of Petrohex!"

"Belay that," Lio Convoy commanded. "We may not get another shot."

The issue become moot less than a cycle later, as a K-Class Maximal dropped onto the defenseless city. The city-shattering explosion knocked out the transmission for several long nanokliks, and Lio Convoy started to think that the bomber had gotten caught in the blast radius. It had been equipped with a magnetic shield specifically designed for maximum effectiveness against K-Bombs, but the operative assigned to Protihex—Movor was his name, and he willed himself to remember the somewhat sarcastic soldier who had given his everything to the Resistance—was set at the penultimate level. It was enough to rip deep into Cybertron's interior and would reach well into the stratosphere. Explosions of that magnitude hadn't been felt on Cybertron since the Great War.

Finally the signal resumed, and there was a faint murmur of relief comingled with horror. Where once northwest Protihex had been was now only a deep crater, larger than Rodimus' Folly.

The signal had, oddly, improved, despite the massive torrents of energy unleashed by Protihex's destruction. It took Lio Convoy only a few nanokliks to realize why… the jet drones had been blown out of the sky. They must have been responsible for the jamming. It helped explain how Damaxus and Carpessa could fall without any reports getting out.

"*Dreadrock*, this is Resistance Command," he intoned. "Raise altitude to your absolute ceiling. We need to see the net impact."

"Roger that," came back the trembling voice of the pilot. He would have nightmares for the rest of his life, Lio Convoy realized. He himself no longer dreamt.

As the *Dreadrock* climbed, the true scale of the devastation became apparent. Bump narrated what they were seeing with breathless horror. "That there, I believe, would be the Xithricite Intrusion, or what's left of it. That means that this bit here used to be Nuon." There had been no reports that the Vehicon infection had spread that far west. B'Boom abruptly strode out of the room, slamming the door behind him. Blackarachnia gave him a questioning glance, and Lio Convoy nodded his assent. She slipped unobtrusively away, to provide what comfort she could to the being who many regarded as the conscience of the Resistance.

"Ah," continued Bump, "look there? That used to be the Floron, a tributary to the Timonium River that ultimately flows into the Rust Sea. That means that this bit here," he

gestured at the outer rim of the crater, "used to be Lower Petrohex. It looks as if some 80% of that city emerged unscathed, though of course there will be fallout to contend with."

Even Psycho-Orb was starting to look pale by this point. Lio Convoy noticed that Grimwing was gripping the armrest of his chair hard enough to twist the metal. When the destruction of a fifth of one of their own cities could count as good news, things had progressed down a dark path.

As the *Dreadrock* continued to circle, the limits of the destruction became apparent. "Ah, look there, it would seem that southeast Protihex has survived." Indeed, the various megastructures that defined the overall cityscape of Cybertron's south polar city were starting to show some definition, though it was clear even from the enormous height the *Dreadrock* was flying at that the blast had done serious damage.

Lio Convoy felt himself tense up. The survival of large swaths of Protihex was not part of the plan. The Vehicon infestation had begun close to the center of the city, and it was as yet unclear how far it had spread.

Then the image began to fill with static again. Nanokliks later, a swarm of what looked like fifty jets began to converge on the *Dreadrock*. "Get out of there," he commanded, and was mostly able to keep the panic from his voice.

It was to no avail. The *Dreadrock* and its pilot were overwhelmed, and the visuals cut out just as five of the jets transformed and boarded the craft. Lio Convoy forced himself to listen to the audio for the half a cycle it continued to broadcast the pilot's screams.

When it was mercifully over, he turned to what was left of his council. "Order all available reserves to Upper Petrohex. We launch our counterattack from there. Oh, and someone warn Rageland that, if we fail, she's about to face an onslaught of Vehicons. We may as well cede Praxis to her… for as long as there *is* a Praxis."

V Plus 0.92 Solar Cycles
Southeast Approach to Tyrest

As the *Star Dasher* sped over the network of fortifications and trench-works that marked the area loosely understood to be the front, the broken and militarized terrain gave way to the mysterious, infinitely deep chasms known as the sonic canyons. Apocryphal tales purported them to lead deep into Cybertron's heart, down to where the mythical Primus held court with other deities even more strange.

"Tyrest is just ahead." Autojetter informed them. "We should be able to put in for a much-needed refueling, and then you guys can work out what you want to... hang on." He broke off as a proximity alarm sounded in the cockpit. "Damn it, we've got incoming!" His warning was confirmed a moment later when an explosion rumbled against the outer shell of the transport, knocking them off their feet and causing consoles and lighting to spark and fritz.

Klaxons shrilled and red emergency lights wheeled as steam from ruptured conduits flooded *Star Dasher's* crew compartment.

"Scrap!" Cheetor yelled, jumping back and squirting a sparking console with a fire extinguisher, "Where the *frag* did they come from?"

"I don't know." Autojetter replied, "But we can't take many more like that!"

"Vehicons?" Preditron asked, bracing his enormous frame against the bucking of *Star Dasher's* evasive maneuvers.

Ser-Ket, optics glued to one of *Star Dasher's* consoles, which displayed many worryingly red glyphs, shook her head, "No," she hissed, "Maximals! And I have a lock..."

"Belay that!" Cheetor shouted, "They're just twitchy, we just came over the front lines, don't forget."

Ser-Ket looked at Preditron for confirmation, but he was merely staring serenely.

"Hate to disappoint you, Miss Pred Of The Stellar Cycle," Autojetter told them, "But this crate doesn't have any ammo left. Unless you want to lean out the porthole with your gun?"

There was a whine followed by a worrying crunch as a piece of the *Star Dasher's* nosecone flew past the porthole.

"That does it!" Ser-Ket yelled, bracing herself in a fighting crouch "I don't need to stand here and take this, BEAST M—" she stopped as Preditron's huge hand landed on her shoulder.

"Have we hailed them?" he asked, calmly.

"I'm trying," Cheetor said, "But the first shot knocked out our comms. I've rerouted but it's low power and they're jamming everything they can. They probably think the Vehicon virus can be transmitted wirelessly."

They paused as Autojetter threw *Star Dasher* into yet another desperate dive, the city of Tyrest loomed up in the starboard porthole as he banked to avoid another missile.

"A reasonable precaution," Preditron mused. "Although thankfully, it would appear, unnecessary, based on our own experiences."

"If we can't *shoot* at them." Ser-Ket growled, "do we at least have countermeasures?"

Autojetter gave a helpless shrug. "We used up everything getting out of Protihex." He hauled the yoke left and the *Star Dasher* plunged in the opposite direction, unseating Cheetor and hurling him to the deck with a cybercat yelp.

"Frag this!" Ser-Ket spat, and before anyone could get close to her she hauled herself to the emergency exit and kicked the door open.

"Wait!" Preditron yelled, over the sudden rush of air and roar of the transport's engines. Ser-Ket just grinned.

"Beast mode!" As she jumped from the craft, Ser-Ket could feel her dragon mode components sliding into place. Even in uncontrolled free fall she was able to feel the moment her visual feed transferred from the cranial unit of her humanoid mode to the boosted optics of her dragon form. As soon as her beast mode tactical overlay booted up, she flapped her newly arranged wings and soared into the air.

"Ser-Ket, be mindful," she heard Preditron's voice over her internal comms, "These are potential allies."

"Even if they don't know it yet," quipped Cheetor.

"Relax!" she told him, "This won't take a cycle." Sensors picked up weapons fire to the right and she flapped towards it, diving to avoid a spray of tracers and pulling back up with a roar of energon-flame to destroy a spiraling missile. The Maximal who had fired it was in the form of an orange and blue sciuridon, whose frantically squawking ident revealed him as "Nightglider."

He was backed up by an agile red and black technohawk who flipped onto her back and unleashed another barrage of missiles that twisted in the air as they started to home in on Ser-Ket's signal. Concentrating, Ser-Ket hovered briefly, chose a targeting solution, and filled the space between them with white-hot energon fire. The ensuing explosion rocked her back in the air and tripped her proximity sensors, but she, and they, were more or less unscathed. As the Maximal flyers tried to re-acquire a lock she saw an opening and climbed, blasting between them without engaging her flame breath.

Concentrating on flying, she could only manage a short message—"I'm a friendly"—in as many different frequencies as she could manage.

Nightglider pulled round to pursue, and finally she received an incoming transmission. "Interrogative: shots fired?"

Ser-Ket groaned, and would have slapped her forehead if she'd had hands and wasn't concentrating on staying in the air. "You were first, idiots."

"Precautionary, Vehicons," the other flyer sent back, flipping over to keep her in view.

"Do I look like a fragging Vehicon to you?" Ser-Ket snapped, "You have noticed that I turn into a dragon and know more than three words?"

Ser-Ket breathed a sigh of relief as Nightglider broke off his pursuit and said to the technohawk, "Wedge Shape, they're clean, we'll escort them in."

Ser-Ket's comms pinged as she headed back towards *Star Dasher*, "Thank you, my child," said Preditron.
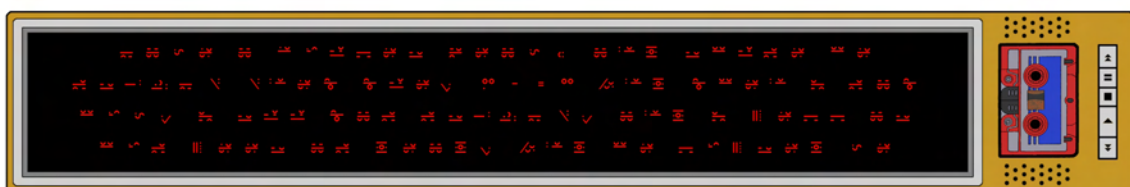
V Plus 1.27 Solar Cycles
Makeshift Resistance Staging Area, Lower Petrohex

All around him, the Resistance reserves were muttering in quiet disbelief that half of Lower Petrohex had been obliterated. Ash from the ruins of the city had been kicked into the atmosphere and was clogging everyone's filters, making the twilight of the long polar evening even darker. Amid all the coughing there was talk of seceding from the Resistance, of urging the city's administrator, Legend Majora, to declare what was left of the city its own political entity. One optimistic little Maximal flier called Dragoyell was advocating for an independent Tri-Torus State comprising Petrohex, Polyhex, and Dodecahex.

Twinstrike couldn't care less. If Lio Convoy nuked Nuon and most of Protihex and some of Petrohex, he must have had a good reason. A reason that apparently involved a massive battle. Twinstrike liked massive battles. He hated being held in reserve, and welcomed the chance to sink his twin jaws into some metal. He hefted his Piston Hammer several times, each time enjoying the clang it made as it impacted on his open right palm.

Funny. Before he got his Beast Upgrade, he used to be a righty. He wondered if it had anything to do with his left dragon head being the dominant one. "When do we get to tear the Builders' new pet weapons to pieces?" he complained to no one in particular.

"Under a megacycle, now," said Spittor dully. Twinstrike knew that, of course, and was just trying to pass the time. Spittor never had been good at reading people. "Can't come soon enough, you ask me."

"Don't be in such a rush to tempt fate yet again, my erstwhile crimson companion." Judora made a show of yawning to show how indifferent he was at the prospect. "We've done an admirable job, to date, of beating the odds, but sooner or later they will catch up with us." Snow Cat was nodding along, but then, Snow Cat always was a little lacking in the struts department.

The word from on high was that there was a massive threat in what remained of Protihex. Something called Vehicons that could reformat you into more of themselves. Sounded nasty. They'd spent the next three megacycles in hastily-assembled staging areas, getting ready to launch a massive offensive to 'stop the infection at its source.' Resistance ships bustled in nonstop, shuttling in reinforcements from Polyhex, Petrex, Corumkan, Helex, even Praxis. Basically anywhere that wasn't directly engaged with the Builders.

He and his unit had been assigned to the *Evac*, an orange and white helicopter that had once been an Autobot. Personally, Twinstrike found the practice of lobotomizing Builder transports and using them as conveyances to be somewhat macabre, but then, he supposed, it was no worse than the way Builder parasites had exploited Predacons like himself.

Their leader, Coelagon, a Champion of the games, had gone to be briefed at the building on the edge of the field they'd hastily cleared for landing craft. Before today, Twinstrike was pretty sure it had been a library.

The dull wail of an air raid siren interrupted their preparations. The chaotic bustle stopped for a nanoklik, then all optics scanned the bleak, soot-filled sky. It didn't take long to identify the many v-shaped formations of enemy fliers. Thousands or more Vehicons were fast approaching, some five hics in the distance and closing fast. It seemed that the Resistance's big push into Protihex was about to become a defensive action.

Twinstrike didn't see who fired the first shot, but suddenly the air was filled with bullets, missiles, energy beams, and even more exotic forms of weapons. The sky was a living thing, breathing pyrotechnics, flexing muscles of dense metal. The Vehicons were obliterated en masse, winking out of existence by the dozens in brief but spectacular conflagrations. They attempted evasive maneuvers, but even with Twinstrike's inexpert optics he could tell that they were rudimentary at best. They seemed to have only a few pre-programmed patterns, and a limited ability to improvise.

Nothing in Twinstrike's arsenal could reach the three hics that separated the Vehicon fliers from the Resistance position. By this point the thousands of Resistance fighters who had been gathered had been organized into less-chaotic formations. Snow Cat and Coelagon were busy firing into the sky with their rifles, and Judora had taken to the sky to engage the Vehicons that way. Only he and Spittor were unable to be useful, and it ground his gears something fierce.

"This vents my valves," he shouted to Spittor over the din. "It's a tungsten-turkey shoot, and we're missing out!" Spittor just grunted his agreement, then coughed. The battle was making the whorls of soot worse, especially low to the ground.

Something about that didn't sit right with Twinstrike. He converted to his two-headed dragon mode, and

scanned the ground, the enhanced optics of his beast form allowed him a better sense of the landscape. His head swayed, left to right, and then he spotted a red glow that didn't belong. Then another, then another.

"Coelagon, 11 o'clock!" he cried. His commander looked, then the color drained from his optics. He started to speak into his wrist, then tapped Spittor on the shoulder.

The mechs that hadn't been engaged with the aero drones turned their attention to the ground. Cycle drones were less than half a hic distant and

roared a challenge to the sky, almost hoping that the Vehicons would close the hic-and-a-half distance that separated them from himself. In this form, he could expel fire hot enough to melt cybertanium, and in his frustration he unleashed a phlogiston-fueled plume into the sky.

His other self was making a lot of noise, so he glanced over and immediately saw what had his left-head spooked. Hordes of ground-based Vehicons were fast-approaching their position. "Yes!" he thundered. They were still out of range, but he

closing rapidly.

Resistance troopers turned their attention to the fast-approaching throng of motorcycles. Many of those unable to engage the jets were close enough to fire at the advancing bikes. One enterprising Maximal ro-simian even managed to turn one of the heavier guns, which was about to be crated up and loaded onto a ship, into action. With its every shot, scores of Vehicons vanished.

And yet, they kept coming. For every one they destroyed, ten more seemed to roar out of the gloom, their headlights baleful and challenging. They'd already closed half the distance, and showed no signs of slowing. The roar of their engines drew the attention of more and more of the Resistance soldiers, who shifted their focus from the aero drones.

Twinstrike's left self looked up, and realized that stopping the cycle drones was starting to cost them air superiority. One of the aero drones broke through the circling fliers above and strafed some of the massed Resistance fighters. There were screams of anguish before one of the Resistance fliers—Judora, actually—took out the drone that had broken through.

The true peril of their situation was becoming apparent. Wave after wave of Vehicon continued to approach, and both ammunition and energon was starting to run low. One teal and grey Predacon, who had been firing a wrist-mounted autocannon nonstop for the entire time, had his weapon glow red with heat and then explode, knocking him prone and tearing off his arm. If

was certain that wouldn't last for long.

He yearned to press forward, but Coelagon restrained him. "Our strength is in numbers. Not that different than game CCCXIX, when Bantor's forces tried to pick off our group one-by-one. Well, I was wise to him." The white-and-grey Predacon fired off a shot. "Don't worry, you'll get your chance."

At the rate at which the Vehicons were being obliterated, he had his doubts.

And then the tenor of the battle started to change. The aero drones had been pushing steadily closer, but with the combined might of the entire Resistance reserves had been held at bay. But now, the much closer cycle drones were roaring ever nearer, close enough to hear their unnerving muttering of "Seek, locate, destroy," chanted almost like a mantra. More and more bots turned their attention from the skies to the ground, and the cycle drone advance faltered.

Faltered, but wasn't broken. They started converting into their mono-wheeled humanoid form and blasting back, and bots were forced to seek cover. There was screaming from behind him, but he paid it little heed. His moment was coming soon, he could sense it.

And then came the tank drones. Clearly slower than the cycle drones, they massed behind the battle lines the cycle drones had created and began to open fire, arcing their shots to strike behind the Resistance line. At some point in the din, Hadean had slipped under the horizon, and the light of their shots provided what

they won the battle he'd probably be fine, but that was starting to look less and less certain.

He felt his right self urge him forward and reveled in the impulse. Many other Resistance fighters went with him, a semi-organized counterattack. He was at the vanguard, and took several energy bolts for his trouble. He shrugged off the hits, but knew that too many more of them would slow him down and eventually disable or destroy him. He bellowed his defiance, then unleashed his fire breath, melting several cycle drones who had attempted to outflank him. The more they came, the more he destroyed. This, indeed, was what warfare was all about.

Then one of the drones was on his back, and he twisted about furiously, trying to jerk it off. No good, the thing hung on with mindless determination, and started tearing through his armor despite his furious struggles. He

jagged illumination there was.

Twinstrike's right self looked to Coelagon, who nodded permission. With that, he bounded forward, along with Spittor and countless other Resistance fighters. The tank drones held their position, but the cycle drones rolled forth to meet the charge. Soon the battle devolved into a timeless melee, a hundred brawls between individual combatants. Even as several bolts of energy struck him, he clamped down on one of the cycles and enjoyed the sensation of its internals sparking and bursting beneath his crimson jaw.

A cycle drone jumped through the air, apparently having used one of its fellows as a ramp, and landed on his back. He bucked and twisted, attempting to dislodge it. It was no use, the thing had an iron grip. He felt clawed hands pry into his back, and could think of only one strategy that might prevail. He

transformed, resuming his humanoid form, and the resulting shift gave him enough purchase to tear the purple freak from his back and send it flying into one of his fellows. Both exploded.

The rest of the Resistance fighters in the charge had done no better. The tank drones continued to pelt their heavy gun batteries, and this in turn had enabled the jet drones to achieve air superiority. Cycle drones had broken through and were overrunning the Resistance forces. Everywhere he looked, Resistance fighters were being held down and their sparks compromised. Before his optics, he saw dozens, hundreds of fighters in the early stage of a forcible reformatting. Coelagon shrieked as one of the cycles got to him and his form was perverted into that of one of the tanks. Snow Cat was gone, and he watched helplessly as Judora lost his last dogfight and went spiraling down to the ground, exploding on impact.

"At least he won't become like them!" yelled Spittor next to him. He was in his amphiboid form, spraying any cycle drone that got too close with acid. He and Spittor were now a small island of Predacons surrounded by a sea of Vehicons. The Vehicons realized their strategic advantage and the cycle drones stopped attempting to engage in melee—Twinstrike had already destroyed eight or ten with his Piston Hammer—and formed a

loose ring around them. Their clawed hands peeled back and revealed blasters, and several low-powered bolts slammed home.

"They want us alive, so they can turn us into them," observed Spittor as he collapsed.

Twinstrike, too, fell to the ground. "Then let's not let them." His reservoir of phlogiston had six redundant failsafes to prevent breaches. One by one he disabled them all. With only one to go, he was rolled over and felt cold clawed hands pierce his spark chamber.

"Nuh uh," he said. He heard Spittor laughing and, on impulse, extended his arm and took Spittor's foreleg and squeezed two blue digits. Then he unlocked the last failsafe, an independently powered shielded magnetic bottle.

The explosion destroyed every Vehicon in a fifty-mechanometer radius, and was briefly visible from orbit.

V Plus 1.42 Solar Cycles
Resistance Headquarters, Stanix

The images of the fall of Petrohex were haunting. It was difficult to get clean footage once the battle started to go against the Resistance forces, due to the low-level jamming field each Vehicon generated. Nonetheless, what got through was horrifying. Bots had continued to trickle into the commissary as the true extent of the horror became clear.

"By Primus," whispered Lio Convoy as "How many bots in the Tri-Torus area?"

Bump looked thoughtful for a moment. "In Polyhex, perhaps 200,000. Dodecahex, another 40 or so. Petrohex at 70 at last census. Plus the approximately 30,000 reserve units we shifted there, along with 15,000 in logistical support.

"Three… hundred… fifty… thousand Vehicons. Plus however many survived Protihex. And our forces?"

The room was silent for a moment. All optics turned to Cybershark. "We have some 240,000 currently engaged on the front, and another 40,000 in reserve at staging areas and fallback positions. Plus another 100,000 in support roles."

Lio Convoy ran the numbers. "So they already outnumber us, or will within a solar cycle. Psycho-Orb, how many civilians in our territory? Including breakaway states."

Psycho-Orb slumped lower in his seat. If morale was this low among his senior staff, what must the rank-and-file think? "If we assume Tri-Torus lost along with Protihex and Nuon, then is talking 1.3 million. Give or take. Tripredacus territory, maybe 800,000. MCSF perhaps 600. Of course, in Builder territory, nearly 2 million proto-formers. Plus three million or so Builders themselves, only 5% of which are mobile. "

From the way his face was scrunched together, it was evident that B'Boom was concentrating hard. "Ok, so… we outnumber the Vehicons by a lot. So, we mobilize absolutely everyone, make up as many cyber venom packs as we can." He nodded his head furiously. "We can still win this thing, dudes!" he finished furiously.

"Oh, shut up, B'Boom," admonished Blackarachnia. "We threw everything that wasn't at or adjacent to the front at the problem, and that was before they assimilated all of the Tri-Torus states. And we don't even know if cyber venom really works. Do you want to volunteer to test that theory?"

"Actually," Psycho-Orb interrupted with a raised finger, "I forgot Carpessa and Damaxus are kaput. Is now 1.2 million civilians under our, heh, protection." He opened his hand and a bottle of high-grade engex appeared from subspace. He took a long pull from the bottle.

Fury writ across his face, B'Boom glowered at Blackarachnia. "Fine, brah. But that was only 30,000 fighters. We've got almost ten times that at the front! We pull them back now, and—"

"And what?" lashed out Cybershark. "And the Micromasters blow them away while they retreat? That's your big plan?"

"So what's yours big plan, brah? Surrender?"

And at that word, the entire room went silent. Lio Convoy felt all optics turn to him. He ran a quick refresh of his vocal circuits, then stood up slowly, allowing the gravity of the room to shift in his direction. "The Builders have concocted a terrible weapon, one that threatens the existence of the Maximal and Predacon races as a whole. To not consider the possibility of surrender would be morally irresponsible."

He felt the room take a collective intake of air, heard the almost-imperceptible whir of exhaust fans kicking into high gear to cool overtaxed processors. "So let us consider it. We have said to the Builders, 'no more. We shall no longer be slaves.' Their response? Not content to force us to their will through the shackles of guns and commerce, they plan to rewrite our very CNA, to make us mindless tools. Should we surrender, they might call off their hellhounds for a stellar cycle or two. But does any among you doubt that the Vehicons are here to stay? Each infraction we commit will result in not a trip to a jail cell, or a prison colony, or even a Game. No, the punishment for disobedience will become *that*." He pointed dramatically at one of the screens, displaying a frozen image of a Maximal half-reformatted into a cycle drone.

"And so I reject the possibility of surrender. We must make our stand now, today, or face utter and total annihilation." The scattered murmurs of approval turned into full-on applause at this point.

Alone among his senior staff, Cybershark still looked skeptical. "But how? How do we beat them?" The room went quiet again at the question. Lio Convoy walked over to him and clasped his shoulder.

"Thank you, my friend, for asking the tough question. The answer is, we don't. The Vehicon threat cannot be faced head on. We can warn the population to hide themselves, take shelter where they can, but we cannot prevail in a military confrontation with this enemy, not with our forces arrayed as they are." He paused, and let the room drink up his words. He noticed that Blackarachnia had turned one of the viewscreen cameras in his direction and that it was recording. He nodded a silent thank-you to her, then continued.

"Our forces are arrayed to thrust into Builder territory. We have been taking advantage of our superior efficiency and lack of dependence on traditional infrastructure to push forward. This has resulted in a slow strategy, one where we seize a city, consolidate our gains, and then use it as a base to push forward. But if we are to win, if we are to even survive, that has to change. If Maximals and Predacons are to have any future, Iacon needs to fall. Not next stellar cycle. Not next orbital cycle. Bots of the Resistance… we march on Iacon tonight!"

Part 2 - Burned by the Banks of the Phlegethon

V Plus 1.57 Solar Cycles
Contested Tesarus

The wounded city stretched out as far as the optic could see, illuminated by the low-angle dawn sunlight. Where once had been a vibrant community of artesian and philosophers, metalworkers and fluid dynamicists, now there was only unending wreckage. "Warms the spark, don't it?" quipped Steel Jaw's second, Ramulus. His tone was jovial; only their long stellar cycles of association allowed Steel Jaw to realize that his intent was sarcasm. When faced with such pointless destruction, one could choose to either laugh or cry.

"A fine sight indeed," replied Steel Jaw, savoring the irony. "We certainly are doing Solomus' work."

"No doubt about that. Sir." The last word was clearly an afterthought, though not out of any kind of disrespect. No, Ramulus had been with Steel Jaw since the beginning of the Resistance. They'd fought together before the Maximal High Council carved out the Tagon Heights as their own domain, before beasts, even before Lio Convoy. They'd heard Dynobot speak, agitating for change way back in the day, and signed on when Ramulus was a battering ram and Steel Jaw was still an off-road truck.

"So, about those new orders I brought you, sir. What do you make of them?" Ramulus unconsciously—Steel Jaw assumed it was unconsciously—rubbed at the three scratches that had scoured his Maximal symbol. Steel Jaw had long believed that those under his command should be loyal to him, first, with factions, nations, and causes coming a distant second; marking those in his Pack went a long way towards instilling that attitude in others.

"Honestly, Ramulus, part of me thinks Lio Convoy has lost his Epistemus-damned mind. And wants to draw and/or quarter the officer who brought these orders to me, rather than *accidentally* dropping them into an incinerator."

Ramulus suppressed a grin. "You're welcome to try, sir, though I'll respectfully point out that, in the highly unlikely event that you somehow succeed, the Pack would be without a logistics officer. Training up a new one sure doesn't sound like a fun use of your time."

"No," Steel Jaw chuckled, "I suppose it wouldn't be. I guess I'll just have to let you live for another solar cycle."

"Another solar cycle of life? Does that means you're planning to disobey those orders," asked Ramulus, his not-entirely-false mirth not entirely concealing the gravity of the question.

A bomb exploded in the distance, and both bots flicked their optics in that direction for a moment. "Intelligence reports that there's a massive, nigh-unstoppable army at our backs, chewing up our industry and turning everyone and everything it encounters into more of itself. If even half of that is true, I understand why Lio Convoy wants us to throw

ourselves into the meat grinder. The war of attrition we've been winning… well, it went away as soon as the first Vehicon rolled off the assembly line." His aide had been nodding along, his frown deepening. "But by Adaptus' Cog, that doesn't mean I have to like it!"

"No it does not. Sir. Think we can win?"

That was the question. "Ramulus, I know we can win. The Micromaster pistonheads of the 74th can't stand against the Pack. Not in total war. But we'll spill our oil over every square mechanometer. There's a reason we've gone slowly, methodically, severing their supply lines and using our superior maneuverability to outflank them, forcing them to give ground gradually."

"Yup. That's pretty much what I figured. I'll inform the men. We go forward in a megacycle." Ramulus turned to leave, to get on with the unpleasant task.

"Make it 40 cycles." His aid turned back, questioning. "A megacycle isn't enough time for us to do it right, but it is enough time to let Erector get his fortifications mostly in place if he hurries, and we have to assume that he will. If we're going to do it wrong, may as well force the other guy to do it wrong as well." He paused, and considered his words. His optic settled on the newly-risen sun, casting its weak glow across the battlefield. "Besides, it's cruel to give our mechs too long to get used to the idea that most of them won't survive to see another sunrise."

V Plus 1.63 Solar Cycles
Maximal High Council, Durax

The viewscreen flicked off, the lingering image of Lio Convoy fading into the obsidian blackness of the duraglass. Tigatron felt his internals churning with activity.

"Thoughts?" asked Silver Bolt, the leader of the council, impassively. As the eldest of them—he was a first generation proto-former, predating even the concept of Maximals and Predacons—it was his way to hear out all voices before himself deciding which way to vote on any given proposition. He had been a professor at Drouhard University in Crystal City once, long ago, and he retained a taste for didactics.

"There's a reason we opted for neutrality," rumbled Santon. "Violence should ever be a last resort, not a first one. I for one have a hard time believing these Vehicons are as bad as they say." Before he was elected to the council, he had been a medic in Nova Cronum. He still preferred diplomatic solutions whenever possible; it was he who brokered the fragile neutrality between their fledgling nation and the Builder Assembly.

"That's a load of scrap, Santon," challenged Airazor. She was the youngest member of the council, and a Champion of the Games. That she hailed from Nuon, which had been reported destroyed yesterday, was no doubt influencing her decision. "Lio Convoy has always played it straight with us, and respected our neutrality. I've read data the Resistance has sent about the Vehicons. If you pulled your head out of your exhaust port for long enough to review it yourself, you'd realize that they're coming for us next. The Builders only ever respected our neutrality because they didn't want a multi-front war. Once the Resistance is wiped out it'll be our chassis in the crusher."

"I agree with Airazor that the Vehicons are an existential threat," voiced Lio Minor. He was a police mech, MCSF through and through, and a brilliant tactician. "But all the more reason not to join Lio Convoy on his fool's crusade into Iacon. We should be directing our limited resources south, to Tyrest, the most probable vector for a Vehicon attack. Let's not forget, the Tagon Heights—our territory—has never been successfully invaded in a frontal assault. Rather than running into Builder fortifications at Plurex, we should defend what we have from *any* aggressor, be they Builder, Vehicon, Predacon, or otherwise."

An uncomfortable silence descended upon the Council. Silver Bolt turned towards Tigatron, who was still gathering his thoughts. "Well, Tigatron, I'd still like to get your input," he prompted gently.

He considered the words of each of his peers. He had served many roles over his long years; he'd walked a beat as an MCSF cop, worked as an aide for Assemblybot Cross-Cut, and started a charity designed to help Empties get back on their feet. He was often the swing vote on the council, with the temperate Silver Bolt and Stanton often at odds with the passionate Airazor and Lio Minor.

"Fellow Councilors," he began, attempting to work out his own processor through oration. "I have heard many fine arguments, well-thought-out arguments, both for and against Lio Convoy's proposal. Dearly would I love to maintain our precious neutrality, which has served us well for the past stellar cycle, allowing us to focus on domestic issues and let all Maximals on the Heights live their lives with dignity." Santon was nodding in agreement, while minute signs of disagreement fleeted across Airazor's well-sculpted face.

"We had a grand dream of peace and prosperity. Unfortunately, all dreamers must some cycle awaken. For too long have we turned a blind optic to Builder atrocities, content to let our Resistance brethren, Maximal and Predacon alike, fight our battles. We were able to do so because the Resistance was winning, and we allowed ourselves to become complacent in the face of that seemingly inevitable victory. Vehicons change that equation. We, as a deliberative body, must seek to understand precisely how the future has changed, and adjust accordingly. I… I am still attempting to grapple with this new reality myself…" He trailed off, lost in thought.

He noticed a small commotion off to the side, and gestured for one of the aides to come forward. When he was told what had transpired he could scarcely believe it. After a moment's reflection, he called for a halt to the deliberations. Santon looked peeved and Airazor opened her mouth to object. "My fellow councilors," he said, "This debate is

incredibly important, which is why, before a decision is made it is important that we be in full possession of all relevant facts." He bade his aide let the visitors enter the chamber. "May I present to you, Cheetor, the First Resistor, Preditron, father of our... esteemed colleagues in the Independent Predacus States."

A handsome gold and blue Maximal strode in, dwarfed by a large red and green Predacon. They were, indeed, the legends come life. A winged female Predacon accompanied them.

"These three have come from Protihex, the apparent source of the Vehicon menace, and they have witnessed it first-hand." He gestured for the newcomers to speak.

"If I may," Cheetor said, "There is no debate here." Some of the councilors looked doubtful at this but Tigatron waved for him to continue. "We saw a logistics base fall to the Vehicons in a matter of cycles. They systematically wiped out everyone they encountered, Maximals, Predacons, military, civilians. It didn't matter. Those they did not destroy outright they infected with some sort of metamorphic virus, mutating them into further Vehicons to swell their ranks. We only just escaped with our lives."

Santon frowned and turned to the other councilors with expansive hand gestures. "Surely they exaggerate!" he said, "With respect to your position as First Resistor, you have been through a great many things. Was this attack really any different?"

"Silver Bolt, you and I rolled off the assembly line together," rumbled Preditron. "You know how long I have walked this planet. I have lived longer than most and I have fought in many battles, and I have never seen the like."

"Yes... but..." scoffed Santon, "The word of a Predacon? I mean, you *do* have a vested interest here, do you not?"

The femme bridled but Preditron remained calm. "As you choose to believe," he said. "But if there is a more honest mech than Cheetor, I have yet to meet him."

Cheetor leaned in and whispered, "Thanks." Preditron arched a brow ever so slightly. "It wasn't a compliment," he whispered back. Only Tigatron's extraordinary hearing allowed him to catch the exchange.

"Santon," Airazor called out, "I knew you were a wormozoid but I hadn't taken you for such a blatant... factionalist."

Santon scowled and Silver Bolt interjected, "I think Santon is referring to the Independent Predacus States as a polity, rather than the Predacons as a faction." He nodded at Santon who visibly rallied.

"Quite so, it is certainly in the interests of both the IPS and the Resistance that we weaken ourselves combating this supposed menace."

Preditron was quiet, seemingly unsure of what to say, but the other Predacon stepped forward boldly. "For your information," she said, "The Tripredacus Alliance tried to get Lio Convoy to kill Preditron to win their support, so, frankly, if you think this is scrap all to do with Predacon or Resistance politics you need to de-magnetize your cranial units from your skidplates and realize that we are way beyond that."

Tigatron frowned, "Is this true, miss…" he asked.

Preditron nodded, "My companion is called Ser-Ket. And it is true, I am a persona non grata in the only independent nation my people have ever had, and my adopted cause is run by a bot who would have had me assassinated for his version of the greater good. I appeal to you now not as a Predacon, or a member of the Resistance, but as a Cybertronian."

The councilors murmured to each other and Tigatron could sense that the newcomers almost had them. Cheetor closed the argument. "The threat is real, it is out there, and it will annihilate us all, Maximal and Predacon alike. Even beyond that, I truly believe that, although the Builders may have unleashed the Vehicons, even they will succumb to them in time. It's that serious."

The newcomers were asked to leave, and the deliberation lurched on for another megacycle, but Tigatron knew how it would end. When Silver Bolt finally called the vote, only Santon dissented, and Tigatron couldn't fault him for voting his conscience. Much.
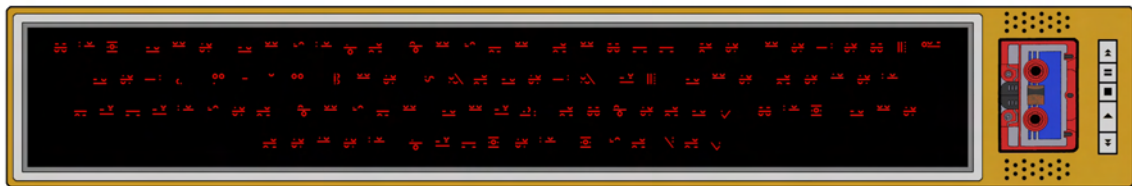
V Plus 1.67 Solar Cycles
Tripredacus Alliance Bunker, Upper Kalis

"…I hope you'll consider my words," finished Lio Convoy.

Ram Horn just snorted. "After you failed to deliver Preditron to us? Fat chance, gearslip." He hated the Resistance, and especially Lio Convoy.

"General," implored Cicadacon, his white and purple face cast in unnatural tones of red by the single crimson bulb illuminating the trio. "Let us not be hasty." He changed his focus. "Thank you for bringing this to our attention. Our not-inconsiderable spy network has been reporting much the same things. We shall… deliberate, and inform you of our decision."

Pffff, thought Ram Horn as Lio Convoy's image winked out. *Deliberation my thick, bifurcated horn.* "You can't seriously be considering listening to that loser." He pounded

his clawed hand on the table for emphasis, hard enough to make the light over their head sway.

Red light danced with shadows about the periphery of the room. Cicadacon leaned forward and rested his chin on his folded hands, and the interplay of light and dark flitted across his face. "That loser, until yesterday, controlled half of the planet. And the Secret Police reports are unambiguous... the Vehicons are no figment of his imagination, but a deadly reality."

"Like I'm scared of a few mindless drones? Bring 'em on! The Legion'll kick their skidplates up one side of the Magnalium Mountains and down the other!"

"Do you believe that," asked Cicadacon, "or are you just attempting to provoke me? Again."

Good question. But then Ram Horn was never much of one for introspection. "Let me turn it around on you. We got us a, whaddyacallit, a land grab right now. The way our troops are positioned, we get to snatch lower Kalis, the rest of Kaon, Kolkular if we play our cards right. From there, who knows? Hexima? Altihex? Uraya? Petrex? Notice how three-quarters of those cities are currently in Resistance hands? Might be that Lio Convoy notices that too."

Cicadacon threw up his hands in exasperation. "We want those cities because they're full of Predacons! What good will it do us if their CNA gets overwritten into mindless Vehicons?"

"You ask me, we spend too much time looking up to smart bots. So-called experts. What have they ever done for us? Mindless Vehicons might be the wave of the future." Ram Horn sat back and took a drink from his ever-present tankard of oil.

"You are impossible," accused Cicadacon. "You contradict everything you hear, just to enjoy the sound of your own voice." Ram Horn shrugged, half-smirking in acknowledgement.

"Perhaps," began Sea Clamp, breaking his characteristic silence for the first time since Lio Convoy had contacted them, "Ram Horn is correct. Perhaps Lio Convoy fears that, should the Independent Predacus States remain unmolested, we would become the dominant post-war power."

This was surprising, thought Ram Horn. Sea Clamp seldom spoke up; he normally allowed Ram Horn and Cicadacon reach some accord, then signed off on it. When he spoke, it usually signified that there was a matter of grave import on the table.

"Let us look at the facts," Sea Clamp continued. "Fact: the Resistance deployed K-Class munitions over three of their own cities, including Protihex, their largest industrial base. Fact: our agents embedded in the Resistance report massive activity at the front. Fact: Polyhex and Dodecahex are under tremendous Vehicon assault, an assault originating from what remains of Protihex. What conclusions can we draw?"

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Cicadacon started to speak, but Sea Clamp raised a claw to silence him, then turned to Ram Horn. "Uhhh… Vehicons move fast?" Sea Clamp nodded, silently urging him to continue. "They've got Lio Convoy spooked enough to abandon his slow-and-steady approach in favor of a desperate, win-it-or-lose-it push to Iacon?"

"Indeed," congratulated Sea Clamp. "And that means that there are two massive fights to be had. One is against the Vehicon horde that will come sweeping over our southern flank, the other is a valiant strike on the Builders themselves. Now, clearly, a defensive engagement against the Vehicons is a far safer, more prudent course of action, which is no doubt why Ram Horn is advocating for it so strenuously."

That didn't sound right, Ram Horn thought. "Hey, wait a cycle!"

Sea Clamp just continued speaking, paying his interruption no heed. Ram Horn hated that. "That being the case, I see little choice but to cast my vote with him, to let caution prevail."

"Woah, now, I don't remember calling a vote. This is just, you know…" he searched for the word. "Deliberation! And yeah, sure, safety is great and all, but it wouldn't be very Predacon of us to let Lio Convoy grab all the glory."

A light seemed to dawn in Cicadacon's optics. "It's quite likely that the Maximal Nation will aid him as well."

"Right," nodded Ram Horn. "Good point! So, on reflection, maybe Iacon *is* the way to go! Screw defense, we go straight to offense! I move the vote!"

"Seconded," chimed in Cicadacon, just a shade too quickly.

"Well," said Sea Clamp, somewhat incredulously. "I would seem to be in the minority. I suppose I have little choice but to put my vote behind Ram Horn's plan after all."

"Yeah!" Ram Horn shouted as he pumped his fist into the air. He could be forgiven for failing to notice the conspiratorial glance his two colleagues shared, for it lasted less than a nanoklik.

V Plus 1.73 Solar Cycles
Praxis, Rageland

"Keep moving," she commanded to the long line of refugees, wearily making their way to the relative safety of Triax. One of the infernal aero drones streaked in overhead, having

pierced the heavy battery of fire her weary army was throwing into the sky. She took aim with her medusozoa cannon, mounted on the end of her right wrist, and fired. She hit, and the Vehicon turned to stone and plummeted from the sky, shattering into a thousand pieces.

When Lio Convoy had offered her Praxus—she preferred to think of it by its traditional parsing, but then, she'd always been a traditionalist—Rage had naturally suspected a trick of some sort. The Resistance was a devious opponent, always full of scheme and nested plans, and the apparent bombing of Proximax not 10 megacycles earlier had thrown her off her game. She knew that she controlled the single largest and most valuable piece of real estate behind Resistance lines not under their authority. Assemblybot Ratbat had even made overtures of a Builder alliance, promising to recognize her territory in return. *Yeah, and he probably had some swampland on Olliphia he'd sell her too.*

Nonetheless, the Resistance *did* pull their fighters from Praxus and leave their various fortifications intact, hardly the actions one would expect had Lio Convoy truly intended her ill. And so she directed her inner circle to review the intelligence the Resistance had sent her on these so-called Vehicons. Her haughty dismissal of the threat soon changed. She charged Shutterbug and Skurge (she refused to indulge him in his affectation of parsing his name like the infamous Decepticon) with an overflight of Proximax.

Only Skurge returned, having witnessed with his own optics that what remained of Proximax had been turned into some kind of sick industrialized hive, pulling energon from the ground with a reckless abandon even as tank drones, aero drones, and cycle drones swarmed about in unnaturally regular formations. He observed Shutterbug's own conversion into an aero drone and only barely escaped with his life.

Whispering honey in her audio sensors, Flytrap encouraged her to pull her fighters back to the palace, to adopt a wait-and-see attitude. She dismissed him contemptuously. Rageland, *all* of Rageland, including newly annexed Praxus, would be defended. Part of her knew that this was exactly what Lio Convoy intended, that he had manipulated her into spending her resources to defend a populace that had, until a solar cycle ago, been loyal to the Resistance. But the greater part of her didn't care.

They came. At first, fighting from fortified positions, the wave after wave of tanks and jets seemed fairly pathetic. Their tactics were elementary, their power inadequate to the task at hand. But they just. Kept. Coming. Coming until her troops ran out of ammunition. Coming until their weapons melted. Coming until the force-generators overheated.

When she realized that the lines couldn't hold, she ordered an evacuation of Praxus (and Perihex with it, just to be safe) into the more heavily fortified Triax, her base of power. And thus was she at the rear of her army, covering the retreat, taking heavy losses in the process.

A group of eight cycle drones broke through their overstretched line of soldiers and began to run amok among the weary refugees. Without hesitation, Manticon, her military commander and strong right arm, converted to manticore form and leapt into the fray,

tearing drone after drone apart. After a brief nanoklik's hesitation, Night Viper—one of her soldiers—and Flytrap—her major domo—joined him. Together they finished the job. Manticon nodded his exhausted thanks. Normally he'd have made short work of a mere octuplet of the drones, but he'd been fighting for three megacycles straight, and fatigue was setting in.

"Your majesty," Flytrap began in his usual obsequious tones, "perhaps the time has come to face certain… unpleasant realities."

She allowed her optics to narrow "Oh? And what, my invaluable advisor, might those be?"

"I understand that you've had your spark set on annexing Praxus for some time. But… really… we don't owe these Praxians anything. Unlike dear old Triax, or even Perihex, your first grand conquest, Praxus is half Maximal. Your army is entirely—and wisely—made up of Predacons. Why should we continue to sacrifice for the likes of them?"

"Don't a fool!" chastised Manticon. "What do you think happens if these Vehicons get loose among the populace?" He waved a hand in a corkscrew motion at the endless line of bots, trudging their way towards the walls of Triax. "We'd have another hundred thousand Vehicons right at our doorstop in less than a solar cycle!"

A stray blast from a tank drone arced in and landed among the refugees. They were so drained that only those directly hit by the blast could even muster a scream.

"Manticon is, of course, correct," she commanded in her iciest of tones. "Perhaps restrict your counsel to matters of diplomacy and commerce from now on, Flytrap, and leave military decisions to those qualified to make them."

Flytrap quailed and spewed unctuous apologies. Deep in her spark, however, she knew that, even if the population couldn't be so easily assimilated into the ranks of her enemies, she'd never simply abandon them to slaughter, even if it meant sacrificing herself.

Such was the burden of sovereignty.

V Plus 1.77 Solar Cycles
National Maximal Army Staging Area, Tetrahex

Cheetor had travelled to hundreds of towns and cities and met thousands of bots but he had never met anyone quite like Magnaboss. The combiner, composed of Tigatron and his fellow High Council members, was a proud and imposing figure at the head of the

Maximal Nation's forces. He spoke little, except to condemn the Vehicons, and watched the Maximal army assemble with a confident stillness.

Never one to keep his vocal circuitry powered down, Cheetor had mentioned to Tigatron after they decoupled that he found the council's combined form unsettling. The statesbot just chuckled. "Wait until you see us in combat. It has been many a stellar cycle since I touched the minds of my comrades, but the old bond is still there, despite our fights in the council chamber."

In the megacycles it had taken to coordinate the troop movements, Cheetor had found himself warming to Tigatron. Whether it was a certain world-weariness they shared, or just alt-mode solidarity, he found himself valuing the older bot's advice, "What do you really think, big cat?" he asked, suddenly. "About all this: Vehicons, Lio Convoy, this flat-out march on Iacon?"

Tigatron smiled sadly. "I think, little cat—" he said, seemingly trying out the last two words to see how they felt, "—that Lio Convoy is dangerous but he is no fool. If he thought that assaulting Iacon was the best way to win this war he would have done it stellar cycles ago. With the Vehicons the Builders have forced his hand, and the game he has been playing has changed."

Cheetor watched a unit of Maximals march past in beast mode. They gave him a cheery wave and he pulled out his cheesiest grin and First Resistor salute before turning back to Tigatron. "So you don't think this can work? So why did you vote for it?"

"I did not say that, little cat," Tigatron said, seriously, "The Builders may find, having unleashed this menace on Cybertron, that they have stirred too many enemies at once. While I am unsure of the odds of success, I do not believe that there is another option. Santon argued for neutrality and ultimately re-enslavement or worse; I argued for a fighting chance. Who among us can ask for more?"

Cheetor nodded grimly. "I hope you're right. I just wish I could do more."

"Do you worry about your friends?" Tigatron asked.

"Of course," Cheetor said, "Preditron is a wanted bot in the IPS. I don't know what he was thinking, taking the last shuttle back to the IPS with Ambassador Sky Shadow."

Tigatron's voice grew earnest. "I have encountered Preditron before, long ago, when he first formed the Tripredacus Alliance. I have seen his true sparks, both in negotiations and summits, and even on the field of battle. Where those who have named themselves for him are concerned, he is completely selfless. I believe that he cares very deeply for the Predacons, and cannot bear the thought that they might face this enemy without him. What resistance he will encounter when he arrives, I cannot say, but I do know that there is nowhere he would rather be."

"Yeah, and Ser-Ket would never leave his side," Cheetor said. "I miss her too."

Tigatron laughed. "She is a breath of fresh air. I hope she finds what she is looking for."

Cheetor turned to watch the thousands upon thousands of Maximals marching in lock-step north towards Plurex, preparing to throw away their home, their neutrality, to face an enemy worse than anything he'd ever seen. "I hope we all do, big cat, I hope we all do."

V Plus 1.81 Solar Cycles
First Church of Primus, Dodecahex

"And the shapes of the plague were like and unlike that of the bots who walk on Cybertron, and they would instead roll or fly, and their faces were not as the faces of bots." Sunstorm paused, his optics filling with sorrow as he surveyed what remained of his congregation. "I believe now is the time spoken of in the Covenant. I believe these 'Vehicons' are the 'plague' that was written of."

The long arched hall of the First Church was half full of Maximals and Predacons, all hanging, somewhat more desperately than usual, on Sunstorm's every word. "But why…" wailed Sharp Edge, "Why has Primus forsaken us?" Despite being hardwired into the ambulatory, Sunstorm was able to coax enough lateral head movement to look kindly on the stricken Maximal. Sunstorm remembered when Sharp Edge had arrived at the First Church of Primus in Dodecahex, many stellar cycles before. He had been shaking and glitching, strung out from nucleon withdrawal. Sunstorm had bade his faithful Micromaster attendants, Gran Arm and Crush Bull to help Sharp Edge to a recharge slab. Primus, in his infinite wisdom, had seen fit to save the poor addict's life, and he had been a devout member of the First Church's congregation ever since. Sometimes he had been too devout. On a number of occasions Sunstorm had had to privately remind Sharp Edge that dedication to the creator's vision required a little more compassion and understanding than the street corners he was used to. Sharp Edge had a tendency to interpret the Covenant literally to the point of violent debate with those who took a more metaphorical stance. Nonetheless, Sharp Edge was one of the most loyal and longstanding members of the congregation, and it pained Sunstorm deeply that he could not find a satisfactory answer to his question.

The impassive sculpture of the Creator stared down at Sunstorm as he failed to answer and he grew afraid as the eager, desperate optics of his congregation willed him to say something, anything. He purged his air intakes and started to speak, not knowing the

words before they left him. "I believe," he said, "that the Vehicons, if they have indeed been written of in the Covenant, represent a warning."

"What do you mean?" asked Gas Skunk, "A warning of what?"

"Alas, my child," Sunstorm said sadly "I have only my own flawed understanding to interpret the word of Primus, but I believe that the Vehicons represent what we, as a race, may become if we continue to tread the path of warfare. It is said that they have no sparks, or perhaps anti-sparks. If they live, it is a terrible half-life. They make only war and death, and experience none of the pleasures that you or I may. The Children of Primus are a warrior race, the Covenant does not shy away from that, but the Vehicons represent war without conscience. They are not warriors, they are merely weapons."

Buzzbomb fell to his knees on the red and yellow tiling of the main aisle of the church, clasping his hands together, "But why? Why these endless tests? When the Chaos Bringer appeared in the sky above Cybertron, our forefathers thought us damned, but they overcame him. When the Great War reached such a pitch that the cities themselves walked the stars and laid planets to waste, they made peace. What more does Primus want? What more can we do?"

Sunstorm was about to answer when the ornate doors at the end of the wall swung open and a bot staggered in. He recognized the newcomer as Tusks. He had been around for a little while and was not a regular attendee, but Sunstorm always found his conversation interesting and enjoyed his boisterous hymns. He was shouting, "They're here! They're here!" and Sunstorm realized it was true. From outside he could hear the sound of engines, wheels on metal, the chattering of machine guns and the blank voices of the enemy, "Seek, locate, destroy."

"Come my children," he found himself saying, "Steel yourselves as best you can. We have a fight ahead of us."

At a head gesture Crush Bull and Gran Arm jogged to the open doors and slammed them shut, barring and magnetizing them. They drew sidearms and waited, listening. Sunstorm loved them as sons. The other four members of their Micromaster squad had been killed in an accident and Sunstorm found them broken and lost. They had served him faithfully for stellar cycles and, he reflected wistfully, would probably have to take his role on themselves before the night was out.

The rest of the congregation started taking cover between pews and readying what weapons they had between them, "Should we pray?" Gas Skunk asked.

"Of course my child," Sunstorm told him, "But we should be ready to defend ourselves as well. Primus rewards actions as well as words."

The first attack was a probe. Stained glass windows were smashed in, the doors were tested, but held fast by Gran Arm as Crush Bull stuck her gun through one of the shutters and fired round after round. Sunstorm's proximity sensors were wired into the outer shell of the church: the Vehicons were still out there in their multitudes and still gathering strength—the gathered bots would never be able to fight them off.

Another attack, and then another, gaining in ferocity. Sunstorm closed his optics. They weren't going to make it through this. "My children," he said, and they gathered around his decrepit form, "There is an exit from this church into the vaults. Gran Arm and Crush Bull will lead you. It may take you far enough to escape this menace."

"But what about you?" Sharp Edge asked fiercely.

Sunstorm smiled, "Sadly, I cannot make that journey. I am too old, my systems too entangled with this church. I fear that if it falls, so do I, but I have lived a long enough life for any being and I have been privileged to see the wonders and horrors of all Primus' creation. Do not grieve. Soon I shall be one with the Matrix. Perhaps we will be reunited in the Well when your stories end."

As the last of the congregation were hustled into the tunnel, Sunstorm felt his mind drifting, as it had done for stellar cycles now. He remembered his first conversation with Lio Convoy. Gran Arm had been opposed to their meeting, feeling that a Builder church in Resistance occupied territory would soon become a target.

But Lio Convoy, while young in solar cycles, had impressed him with his wisdom. He had told Sunstorm that the Resistance, while committed to winning the war against the Builder regime, was not opposed to any one race or religion. If Sunstorm renounced the Builder Assembly, and would pay its taxes to the Resistance authority, then the First Church would be left alone. Sunstorm agreed to 'render unto Carzap,' and left alone they had been. Some of his congregation were members of the Resistance, but most were not. They continued his work to help the Empties of Dodecahex, providing shelter and what energon they could... and now it was going to end. His faith in Primus' vision prevented true sorrow. He was ready.

As the doors and windows of the First Church collapsed inwards drones flooded in, chanting and revving their motors, Sunstorm willed open the great painted sun roof of the building. He felt the light of Hadean flood in and energize his old fusion reactors. The experimental upgrades had never been stable and he had not attempted to use or even maintain them for hundreds of stellar cycles. He looked into Primus's carved, impassive face and smiled.

The meltdown wasn't particularly dramatic, but it was enough to collapse the church and seal off the tunnels to the catacombs. If a few Vehicons perished along the way, so much the better.

V Plus 1.84 Solar Cycles
Contested Tesarus

The 74th division was in a bad way. They, like most of the Builder forces, had been giving ground for the better part of a stellar cycle. Ever since the Maximal High Council stabbed the Builder Assembly in the back, basically. And now the Predacons had abandoned them too? It was almost too much. The troops were demoralized, muttering talk about a 'negotiated settlement' when they thought he couldn't hear, but that was a decision far above Erector's pay grade.

The other topic of conversation was the new ICS story. Just this morning there was a segment about a new superweapon loose behind enemy lines. The talking heads were long on speculation, short on details. Erector would believe it when he saw it; there had been too many propaganda pieces about developments sure to turn the tide, and none had panned out. Still, if it gave his troops even a glimmer of hope, he supposed there was some value to it.

For right now, his priority was getting this new line properly fortified; no small task given the lack of suitable equipment. Fortunately for his bots, he'd become a master at improvisation.

"Keep at it, boys and girls," urged Erector. He kept a rough enthusiasm he didn't feel in his voice. "You did good getting the anti-personnel mines in place before dawn, but I want our force-generators active within the megacycle, and where is our Inferno-cursed artillery?" It was difficult to keep them motivated; they'd given up well over a hundred hics of ground over the past three orbital cycles to the slow but relentless advance of the Resistance, taking some 30% casualties in the process. Reinforcements trickled in—they'd recently started drafting Cyberdroids, which represented a whole other challenge for him, getting the useless-alt-moded fops into combat shape—but they weren't close to enough to replace his losses.

"Aww, come on, boss," whined Strikedown. "What's the point in building these magnificent lines again and again and again when the Resistance just keeps going around us, severing our transportation arteries, then vanishing into the underbrush?"

"Shut your face, soldier!" roared Oiler, Strikedown's squad commander. "Your job is to obey orders, not to question them!"

"That's enough, Oiler," Erector said, firmly but not harshly. The last thing he wanted was to undercut his squad commander's authority, but Strikedown's point had to be addressed. He turned to the recalcitrant Micromaster. "I understand your concern, but

there's a reason we build these battlements every time. Those proto-punks out there, they've been striking us indirectly because, for all their amazing energy efficiency, we still pack a much bigger punch than them. They strike from the shadows because they dare not strike in the light. You, my good bot, are still bigger, tougher, and *meaner* than any Maximal or Predacon ever spawned. As long as we keep building these redoubts, they'll have no choice but to keep coming at us indirectly. There's no way Lio Convoy is going to feed his army to our guns, but that makes it even *more* critical that we keep setting them up." He patted the white and blue Autobot on the shoulder. "Understand?"

A crisp salute was his answer. "Hadn't thought of it that way, sir."

"Besides," added Oiler, "the day we don't build them is they day they launch a frontal assault our way."

Erector smiled at her. "We should be so lucky." Then his smile vanished. From the corner of his optic, he spotted a streak of light flying into the sky. "Get down!" he yelled, and shoved Oiler and Strikedown to the hard metal ground.

The streak of light turned out to be a fragmentation foam nexus. It burst over the division's position; screams of the dying and mangled filled the air. Erector was back on his feet, barking orders. "Get those damn force-generators active now. I don't care if they're not perfectly aligned, just do it!" The shimmering hazel of miscalibrated forcefields appeared overhead, just as the next barrage of Resistance fire came in. A series of living-metal-destroying-spheres came streaking overhead, and only the hastily-activated fields shielded the bulk of the 74th from an agonizing demise.

Volley after volley of the thunderous assault smashed into the 74th defenses. Nanokliks ticked into cycles as a malevolent rainbow of destruction burst overhead. *This wasn't like Steel Jaw at all*, thought Erector, even as he darted from position to position, shoring up morale and ensuring that the wounded were dragged back and his scant reserves brought forward to take their place. He supposed it was possible the Resistance forces were just sniping at him, but deep in his carburetor he doubted it. This felt like a bombardment designed to soften his troops up for a frontal assault. But then, why not take the time to get the Resistance artillery into position, do it right? Any advantage of attacking the 74th before they were fully dug in would be offset by their own poorly-surveyed positions, leaving the Resistance open for a counterattack.

Counterattack. He scanned the war-torn landscape, looking for the source of the bombardment. His hastily-erected energy barriers held, though eventually they'd overheat or simply run out of energon. But not if he shut down the fusillade first. He sent out wireless pings to his fliers, and managed to get through to one. "I need to know where those Inferno-cursed Resistance are firing from! Get a damn recon team in the air this cycle!"

The Decepticon Dark Skies Patrol all looked to their leader, incredulously. "Us... take off into that?" asked a quavering Ram-Jet, voicing the question they were all thinking. Wind-Sheer was about to take him to task when Thunder-Clash interrupted.

"Ours is not to reason why," quipped the grey mech. "Erector says fly, I say 'how high?'"

"Thank you, Run-Over," agreed Wind-Sheer, all the while knowing that the weasel would make him pay for his support somewhere down the line. "Gentlemen, it won't take The Pack long to meet us in the air, so Thunder-Clash, you keep your optics on the sky. The rest of us, we find those artillery. We've only just dug in, so they must be right behind us. I'm hoping they haven't had time to effectively camouflage their positions. In case they're using holography, keep an eye out for artifacting. Any questions?"

"Go out on a Tuesday? Who am I, Charlie Sheen?" asked Run-Over. For whatever reason, the tan mech communicated entirely in quotations from an Earth television show. One would think he'd run out of things to say, but apparently the show had lasted for several thousand episodes.

"Yes, be that as it may, we're off!" Wind-Sheer ran a few steps and leapt into the air, converting in this stealth fighter configuration without looking back. As always, part of him was mildly surprised that the other three followed him into the tornado of fire.

Disaster struck almost immediately. Ram-Jet, who was a few nanokliks behind his fellows judging by his position, got his wing clipped. Though the impact seemed minor and his altitude low enough to make the crash survivable, he crashed into the no-bot's zone of their own mine field and exploded on impact.

With their initial success, the Resistance gun fire intensified. "Climb, climb!" Wind-Sheer urged, putting as much distance between himself and the mostly ground-based Resistance troopers trying to put large holes in his chassis.

"You know what I blame this on the breakdown of?" asked Run-Over, who then paused to dodge some improbably-high energy bolts. "Society."

Just as they seemed to escape the bulk of ground fire, Thunder-Clash called out a warning. Wind-Sheer directed his attention in the direction the smarmy mech had indicated and, sure enough, a pack of Resistance fliers was coming up to meet them. Fortunately, as versatile as beasts were, jets were faster and more powerful, if not more maneuverable. "Be careful, people," Wind-Sheer cautioned.

"Roger that."

"I call the big one 'Bitey.'"

The lead mech, a green jurassanoid, flew directly towards Wind-Sheer, looking as if he intended to ram. Hydraulics screaming, Wind-Sheer tried desperately to pull to the side to arc away from the rapidly-closing Maximal. He only partially succeeded, barely dodging the creature but passing near enough for him to convert to his humanoid form and use a

magno-ax to tear into Wind Sheer's fuselage. He grunted in pain, then converted to his own anthropomorphic configuration. The two plummeted to the ground as they grappled.

"Let go you crazy Maximal," he growled, the ground spinning ever nearer.

"I don't think so," came a scratchy—but distinctly feminine—voice, her lone blue optic flashing as she spoke. "Skimmer never let's go!" He was sure he was stronger than her, but it was difficult to get leverage, especially with her ax lodged in his left shoulder.

Then she lit up, backlit by a blast from Run-Over's acid shooting ray. "Take that, Dick Tracy!" he shouted as he pulled out of the dive.

Her teeth grit as she tried to shrug off the acid eating away at her superstructure, but Wind-Sheer knew this was his best—maybe only—chance. He managed to get his right arm between them and shoved, hard. She lost her grip on the ax and went tumbling off. He converted back to jet mode and willed his engines to fire. They failed to catch, and he tried to ignore his impending deadly rendezvous with the ground and fired them again. This time they did, and he managed to pull into a loop that avoided both the ground and a nearby inconveniently-placed outcropping of pulverized metal.

Somehow in the confusion he'd been separated from his squad. He tried to get his bearings, despite a few stray weapons blasts aimed vaguely in his direction, and then spotted Thunder-Clash in a furious dogfight with a tan, purple-winged Predacon. It was breathing fire at every pass. Wind-Sheer, despite his damage, closed in and tried to get a bead on the Pred, but he didn't want to risk hitting Thunder-Clash. Run-Over, now in humanoid form, seemed to be having the same problem when a red-and-black insecatron-thing with grey wings swooped up and raked him with claws.

"Why you little—" challenged Run-Over, and fired an unerring shot that hit the Predacon center-mass. With a sharp yelp of pain, she started to plunge.

"Freefall!" shouted its companion, and she broke-off her own attack to try to intercept Freefall before she could hit the ground. Thunder-Clash took advantage of the distraction to loop around, take careful aim, and blast the would-be rescuer out of the sky.

"You gentlemen ok?" Wind-Sheer asked.

"Nothing a long soak in an oilbath won't cure," observed Thunder-Clash.

"I bent my Wookie," Run-Over said sadly, tenderly patting his scoured side.

He caught a flash behind a wrecked hyperway. "Well, would you look at that? Gentlemen, I believe we've found our artillery battery!"

The location of the enemies' heavy guns couldn't have come sooner. Twenty cycles of pounding had rattled his troops, caused no shortage of casualties, and were straining his defenses nearly faster than his engineers could repair them. Nearly.

But now the time had come to give some back. "Prepare for counter-bombardment… position 17.3 by 172.9!" Erector waited, counting off the long nanokliks he knew it would take his bots to man their positions and aim. Finally, when he had given enough time for at least 80% of them to be ready, he gave the fateful order.

Magna Pulse torpedoes, penetrator missiles, and warp cannons unleashed. A huge peal of thunder roared from the hit and a tower of flame licked the sky; the reckless Resistance emplacement was no more.

Erector had little time to savor the momentary triumph, as a horde of Maximals and Predacons charged from the shadows of the rubble-strewn landscape, their multitudinous weapons flashing every color of the rainbow. Builder intelligence estimated The Pack at 25,000 strong, over four times his own 5,500 troops. Even with the benefits of their partially-erected defenses, it was unlikely the 74th could prevail, no matter what he'd said to Strikedown.

But damnit, he'd make them pay for every microhic!

"This is it, boys and girls!" he cried. "For the Assembly!"

V Plus 1.89 Solar Cycles
Predacon Push into Proximax

Dark Scream laughed with unrestrained merriment as the Micromaster before him begged for his life. "I don't think so, Builder," he chortled as he raised his sword arm, then let it fall, neatly decapitating the grey/purple soldier. Proximax was lightly defended, and he had the sense they'd get through to Iacon in only a solar cycle or two.

"Maintain discipline," barked Autolauncher. Dark Scream rolled his optics and opened his vocoder to begin to reply, but then a glint of something caught his attention and he found himself reflexively flattening. A shot from atop a nearby building had almost taken his head off.

"Level that structure," ordered Autolauncher, who had himself taken cover.

Dark Scream summoned a demolition charge from subspace and ran to the base of the dilapidated high rise. By the looks of it, he'd be doing whatever slumlord owned it a favor.

As he pressed the charge to the building and made to activate the magno-clamp, a shot came within microhics of his hand and he involuntarily withdrew it. The explosive clattered to the ground, not yet armed. A bulky yellow Predacon with jurassanoid kibble stepped out of the shadows. "Find another way, or the next one nails yer spark. There are innocents inside." As fast as he'd appeared, he was gone.

Dark Scream just stared at where the ghost had disappeared to. He'd heard rumors that Proximax had a guardian angel, but he'd never believed them. *Until now.* He looked up and saw where the sniper had to be ensconced. Reluctantly, he shifted to his sciuridon form and rode the updraft created by the battle, ignoring his squad commander's frantic shouting. From above, the sniper was easily visible, so he shifted back to humanoid form and blasted him with his freeze ray.

"Got him, boss," he said, after he landed back with his squad. Autolauncher grunted an acknowledgement, and they continued the assault. If Dark Scream was especially cognizant of non-combatants, no one said anything.

V Plus 1.93 Solar Cycles
Sonic Canyons between Plurex and Tetrahex

Cheetor crawled on his belly to the edge of the cliff. Raising the infra-red binoculars to his optics he could see Micromasters scurrying about on the other side of the canyon. The sonic canyons were the first major obstacle that National Maximal Army had faced on the march from Durax, but if the assault on Plurex was going to go ahead on schedule, they would have to be crossed. With the Vehicons gathering strength in the south, to try to go around would take far too long. To complicate matters, the Micromaster battalions guarding the canyons had mined or destroyed the long-established crossing points.

Cheetor and Magnaboss—in military matters the councilors liked the clarity of his melded mind—had come up with a workable strategy, and as such, the logistics wing of the National Army had brought a number of portable energy projectors. Properly calibrated they could create temporary forcefields over thin air without the weight and inconvenience a portable bridge would have meant. Cheetor made sure he the recorded numbers and disposition of the Micromasters as much as possible before whispering "beast mode." and slinking away at top speed.

Draft was nervous. The 58th had been expecting some kind of action ever since word got out that the Maximals were on the move. Air patrols had brought some inconclusive data that might have been routine patrols or full on troop movements. Draft had asked for it to be clarified but he received a shrug from Eagle Eye in return. He had half a processor to put in a complaint, but who was there to complain to?

Still, he figured, the bridge had been competently mined. He had made sure of that. If the Maximals tried to get across here they would receive a shock. His missile launcher mode could put out a devastating barrage of micro-explosives, if he did say so himself, and the 58th had some decent bots to back him up, even if the competence of the Air Patrol left something to be desired. They'd probably be okay. It would be suicide to try to cross the canyons, wouldn't it?

Then again, was that sound movement? It seemed to come from the bridge area. He had no idea how anyone would have been able to cross with all the mines, but it didn't hurt to check.

Draft never heard the mono-molecular blade as it sliced through his neck. His head bounced once on the cliff-edge and rolled off into the void.
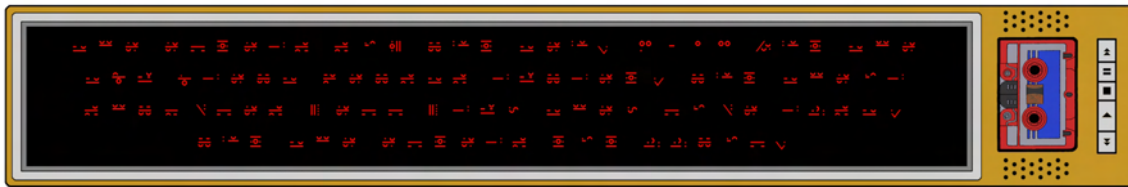
Disconnecting himself from the underside of the bridge, Mantis stowed his claw and raised the laser that marked his position. Before another Micromaster appeared, he grabbed the energy projector from his back and jammed it into the ground. He activated it and heard the whine as it powered up. The projector on the Durax side of the canyon would be targeted at his location and two combined would create a strong enough forcefield for the army to cross. How to stop the 58th from destroying or de-activating the projector before they crossed? Well, that was Mantis' job, wasn't it? According to Cheetor's scouting reports, patrols were light in this area, but he was still only one bot.

The same operation was being carried out along the line of the canyon. Anyone with the ability to fly or crawl undetected to the Plurex side of the canyon was being armed with an energy projector, a lot of ammunition and a few words of encouragement from Bigmos. Mantis couldn't remember his squad commander's words now, he just hoped that the cavalry got here soon.

Cheetor was halfway across the canyon when the shooting started. The Maximal National Army were mostly in beast mode for speed of travel. No one wanted to be caught walking in mid-air with no cover. Maximal flyers were running interference against the real threat, the 58th's Air Patrol, but some of the dug-in artillery was making scrap-metal of the tightly packed bots. He heard a particularly oil-curdling scream to his left and saw that an energy projector had been hit. At least a hundred Maximals were pinwheeling into the seemingly bottomless canyons. Cheetor forced himself to continue; *just get off the bridge, that's all we have to do.*

A bot in armodrillo mode to his right caught an energy bolt in his left foreleg and cried out, tripping over himself and rolling off the edge. Cheetor boosted power to his legs and went full speed. He could not help but leap the last few mechanometers and gasped when he felt firm ground beneath his paws. He transformed back into humanoid mode and uncoupled his tail-gun, running up to the position Mantis had taken for himself and crouching beside the projector, firing pot-shots at any Micromasters who showed their faceplates.

"This scheme's the craziest thing I ever did," said Mantis, by way of conversation. "And then there's the walls themselves, of course," he added gloomily, pointing beyond the row of guard towers and low fences to the high gleaming walls of Plurex city itself.

"One step at a time," said Cheetor, blasting a Micromaster as she made a desperate run for the projector. He looked around, there were hundreds more Maximals this side of the canyon now, and as a consequence those still suspended on the forcefields were not taking as much fire. "Long way to go yet."

"You're telling me," asked Eagle Eye, incredulously, "that we have Maximals walking on thin air out there?"

"That's just what it looks like," Blaze Master told him, patiently, "They're using energy projection technology to ford the canyons."

Eagle Eye looked panicked. "But that's crazy! That's so dangerous!"

Blaze Master nodded, "I know, and that's why we didn't see it coming, but it's happening. We've taken out a few of the bridges but we're falling back in multiple locations."

Eagle Eye turned to Sky High. "Analysis?"

Sky High grimaced a little, "Well, I don't like to be negative, but latest reports indicate that the 58ᵗʰ are only a few casualties away from 'every bot for himself.' Morale's down the waste reclamation port out there. I think we can consider the Maximal beachhead 'established.'"

Eagle Eye groaned, *"*All right, give the order, fall back by squads into the city proper. Don't give up the defenses lightly but I don't want to lose the 58ᵗʰ fighting to the last bot."

Sky High cringed. "I don't think you need to worry about that," she said, "Bots are laying down arms out there. They don't want to fight an enemy crazy enough to attempt that canyon stunt. Frankly I think we should join them."
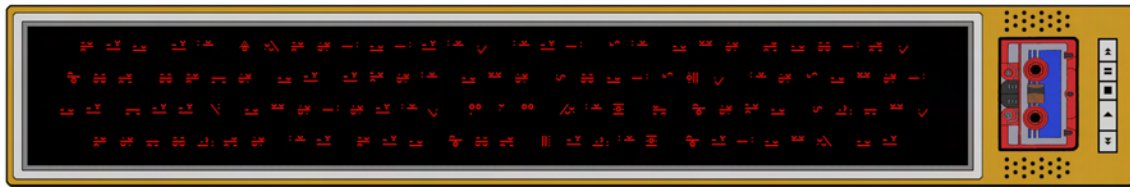
Walking the empty defense line after the battle, Magnaboss congratulated Cheetor, "Casualties were considerably below projections," he rumbled, "Your intelligence turned this assault from a desperate gamble into a shrewd maneuver. I am glad you have joined us. Lio Convoy may appreciate you more as a propaganda tool than a tactician, but you will always have a place in the Maximal Nation, among your own kind."

Cheetor grinned, "Just happy to be of service. Now, don't we have a city to take?"

V Plus 2.08 Solar Cycles
The Cortex, Thetacon

"This is a disaster!" raged the holographic image of Assemblybot Ratbat. Eject was getting more than a little tired of his rants. "Your superweapon was supposed to roll over the Resistance, tie them down completely. Instead, not only have they redoubled their efforts, striking at pretty much EVERY contested city, but the Maximal Nation and the IPS have launched full-scale assaults as well!" Lubricating oils frothed from his mouth, the spittle reaching the end of the holographic field and vanishing into nothing. Had the politico been in the room with Eject, he'd no doubt be drenched by now.

"The last gasp of a dying beast," dismissed Galva Convoy, projecting from the Grand Mal in Nova Cronum. "The Vehicons will tear the guts out of all Resistance infrastructure. Not

even Lio Convoy—and I would know more than most—can fight without energon, transports, munitions. This doesn't even consider the impact on morale to know that his entire race has become… obsolescent."

"There is some truth to that," Assemblybot Traachon ventured cautiously. "Yet, a cornered mechanimal is at its most dangerous. My projections show that they have a 57% chance of breaking through to Iacon on at least one of their four main fronts. There's at least a 10% that all four succeed! Imagine the horror that the Resistance could do to Iacon, the crown jewel of Cybertron." The image of Traachon shuddered, despite his lack of mobility.

Ratbat's image turned to address Riker, the only other member of the council capable of independent locomotion. "Well, Riker? What in Primus' thrice-debugged mainframe are your Micromasters doing about this so-called Last Push RFC keeps crowing about? I think we're all a little tired of them sitting around with their thumbs up their intake valves!"

The creaky old mech fixed Ratbat with a glare. "I will have you know that Hot Rod and his commanders are working *miracles*. In places the proto-formers outnumber us ten to one, and yet his forces never break, never rout."

"No," mocked Ratbat, "but they give ground steadily enough."

Traachon attempted to get the room's attention with a throat-clearing, but Riker blazed on through. "That's what we want! If one of his field commanders can't win, we WANT them to withdraw, in an orderly fashion, so that they can fight at the next front. You Macromasters aren't exactly volunteering in droves to downsize and go fight on the lines, which means we have to preserve the army we have, because we sure as Unicron's tainted beard don't want them slaughtered to the last bot!"

The two Assemblybots glowered at each other. The tension in the room built, until finally the ever-diplomatic Cross-Cut broke it. "Well, there is one other contingency. We could… rescind General Order 66."

The room went silent. "No," cried a voice, and Eject was surprised to hear it was his own. He wasn't technically a member of the Assembly, any more than Galva Convoy was, but due to his closeness with both Lio and Galva Convoy, his insight was appreciated. "No," he said again, somewhat more calmly. "Look, I get it, we're down to the wire, but rescinding Order 66? That's barking up the wrong tree. If we're to have anything like a normal society after the war, we'll NEED Maximals and Predacons. Vehicons may be able to do brute labor, but can they weld? Perform surgery? Work in a lab? Drive in a race? Hell, half of you wouldn't be able to get into your own exo-walkers without your valets. Do you really want one of those hideous… things… trying to fill that role? It's tempting to rely on them to get us off the hook, but we need to give Hot Rod a chance. Let's not jump the gun here."

Though the holo-projector didn't broadcast the audio, he could tell that the Assembly was murmuring to each-other from their realspace gathering at the Pavilion, which had been home to governments on Cybertron since time immemorial.

"Very well," spoke Cross-Cut finally. "We shall leave it in Hot Rod's hopefully capable hands. But if the Resistance breaks through at Yuss or Tesarus, the Maximals at Plurex, or the Predacons at Proximax, we shall revisit this Vehicon issue."

It might have been his imagination, but Eject thought he detected the faintest hint of smugness behind Galva Convoy's placid exterior. The chill that went down Eject's backstrut had nothing to do with the temperature in his office.

V Plus 2.17 Solar Cycles
Yuss Naval Batteries, Yuss

The walls of the Yuss Batteries pressed in on him, but Lio Convoy persevered. For any naval assault on Iacon to be successful, the batteries here needed to be under Resistance control.

Yuss sat on the northern end of the Hydrax Plateau, which rose proudly from the Rust Sea. Its naval yards were the pride of the Builder's marine force, defending the sea's most narrow point between the Plateau and Iacon, the largest city on Cybertron and the pulsing spark of the Builder's social, economic, industrial, and communications infrastructure. Yuss' heavy batteries had never allowed so much as a single capital ship to pass unmolested, and they were protected on the landward side by no fewer than seven dagger-like fortresses, protruding from the ground like the fangs of some enormous jaw, promising to swallow whole any army with the temerity to challenge it. In Cybertron's long—millions of stellar cycles long—history, the seven forts that defended the Yuss batteries, collectively known as The Maxilla, had never before fallen to an invading army.

Until two megacycles ago.

B'Boom had lead the team that breached Fort Zreb, Blackarachnia Fort Xern, Psych-Orb Fort Wenx, Direwolf Fort Briv, Grimwing Fort Scyk, Survive Fort Myvh, and Lio Convoy himself Fort Qalt. While they stormed the land side, Scylla amassed the Resistance naval forces at Stanix and set sail, trusting that her comrades would have cleared the way by the time they arrive.

Now all that remained was to do that thing. Despite their entire landward defense being overrun, the Micromasters manning the batteries stayed at their post, fighting in cramped corridors as Resistance troops battled through to control rooms and slaughtered—or,

occasionally, captured—the crews within. Reducing the battery to rubble with their own artillery wasn't an option; simply blowing the guns would leave the Resistance fleet to the not-so-tender mercies of the Iacon batteries, located on either side of the Trannis Fork River that ran through to Iacon's heart. Though far less potent than the Yuss guns, they'd still pound his fleet into scrap. No, their only option was to capture at least some of the Yuss guns intact and use them on the Trannis Fork batteries. Besides, even if they wanted to blow the Yuss guns, the Builders hadn't left them the time. Scattered reports indicated that the Vehicon advance had, unsurprisingly, consumed all of Polyhex, Petrohex, and Dodecahex. The fighting was now in Rageland, Petrohex, Burthov, Altihex, Helex, and Corumkan, a ring that included the vast majority of productive Resistance territory. Breaching the energy shields defending the Yuss battery—not to mention the lowtech but extremely heavy armor—just wasn't an option. Storming the guns, though costly, was the only way forward.

Survive's team—the Fighting Quasars—took point. It was tempting to simply throw bodies at the problem, but the interior of the batteries was a maze, with the Micromasters inside fighting for every tunnel. Too many Resistance troopers would only inhibit mobility. Despite the objections of his senior staff, Lio Convoy accompanied Survive on the mission, though in deference to their concerns he remained in the rear echelon.

A scraping sound reached his sensitive audio receptors. He turned around just in time to spot a bulky, translucent Micromaster aiming a blaster at his backside. Without thought, he shifted to his cybercat configuration and pounced, the shot sailing harmlessly over his head and impacting on the ceiling, then ricocheting forward. His claws sank into the clear blue exoframe and he tried to get his jaws around the Autobot's head.

"Axle, X-Throttle, help!" shouted the trooper he'd knocked prone, the instant before Lio Convoy's jaws snapped shut and tore a huge chunk out of the Builder's neck. Various fluids spurted and dribbled out, but the Micromaster was no longer of this world. Lio Convoy shifted back to his robot form and willed his recently reforged Solipsistic Sword into his hand. With it, he would be invisible to any broadcast; part of him noted the similarity between it and the Vehicon jamming field, but he filed it away for later.

The Micromaster's two companions were close behind. One of them reacted with horror to Lio Convoy's handiwork, gasping out "Screw," as Lio Convoy closed, running the tall, oddly thin mech through the middle. The third of the trio, her morale evidently shattered, shifted to a two-wheeled configuration and attempted to flee, so Lio Convoy raised his Typhoon Arrow blaster and unleashed twin bolts of energy, felling her from behind.

His handiwork writ across the ground, he allowed himself a silent moment to mourn the loss of life, then turned his sensors to the walls. There had been too many reports of Micromasters striking at his teams from the rear, through corridors that had supposedly been cleared. After three cycles of deep scanning, he found what he was looking for; a secret door.

"~~This is what we've waited for, this is it, boys, this is war!~~" Thus did Goldbug attempt to rally his understrength and understaffed command module, with German-accented English singing. His preferred mode of communication was text dispatches through the Yuss Batteries LAN; his vocoder had been damaged during the Rending, so he tended to save his odd vocal speech—audio clips from old Terran songs and videos—for emotionally-charged communications.

The command center he was hardwired into was a study in controlled chaos. The speed with which the Resistance had seized—or simply blown up—the seven fortresses that made up The Maxilla had caught them all with their gas caps off. At first they had had a complete picture of the battle, unfolding in the twisting tunnels and secret byways that heavily favored his defenders. But as time progressed, despite the horrific losses the Resistance must be taking, they managed to push his defenders back, deeper and deeper into the facility.

When their vibro-pings detected incoming Resistance craft approaching the Yuss Straits, it became apparent why the Resistance was fighting so hard. It also gave his troops a hard objective; if they could just fight on for another 40 or 50 cycles, the Resistance invasion fleet would come into range of the Yuss Batteries' heavy guns. Once the fleet was obliterated, Goldbug could blow the energon stockpile, scuttle the guns, and surrender with good conscience. Though he'd been a mere squad commander—he still fondly remembered the Throttlebots—during the great war, he'd developed a distaste for lives pointlessly lost. If victory was possible, he'd fight to the last bot, but once there was nothing further to achieve, his priority became the lives of his mechs.

And so did he grind out the time, watching the steady approach of the Resistance fleet and comparing it to the fight in the batteries. The fleet was now a mere 30 cycles out from the maximum effective range of his guns, and he'd kept the Resistance away from anything critical in the gunworks. Lights continued to flash, sirens blared, and Micromasters ran hither and thither, carrying off dispatches to his local division leaders tracking the inexorable progress of the Resistance fighters.

"Breach in Sector 3," Gingham reported without bothering to look up from his monitor.

"Refute's team has captured three Maximals in vent f-9," quipped Road Hugger.

"Trip-Up reports contact with the enemy in access tunnel g-12," rattled Deadhour.

"Kingbolt has ambushed a squad of Resistance fighters and has them pinned in a crossfire in oubliette d-7," barked Black Heat.

Goldbug sent his text responses to each of their computer screens, directing reinforcements to sectors 3 and 12, diverting from 7 and 9 where matters seemed to be under control.

Without warning, the primary hatch to the bunker blew open. Before anyone could react, a sphere rolled into the room. "~~Run to the hills~~" Goldbug started to warn, but it detonated before hit the third word. Static filled Goldbug's view for several long

nanokliks, though he could hear the screams of the Super Car Patrol. He willed his optics to come back on line, but when they did he almost wished he was still blind. Lio Convoy himself, flanked by a small black and white Maximal and a brown Predacon whose back was festooned with spikes, was calmly walking through the bunker. With a lazy, one-handed swipe from his oversized sword, he severed Goldbug's command trunk.

"Break," he ordered, "Get me the command codes. Now."

"#yougotit #pieceofcake" warbled the diminutive Maximal as he plugged into the station where, moments before the unflappable Deadhour had directed the defense of the base. The Predacon proceeded to systematically check the Micromasters lying strewn about for life signs. When he rolled Gingham over, the red car groaned. He lifted a heavy brown boot and stamped down on the helpless Micromaster's head. Lio Convoy had the audacity to wince, as if the action offended him, but not enough to issue a countermanding order.

"#badnews #lockedout" reported the Maximal attempting to hack the network.

"How much time?" asked Lio Convoy.

The tiny tech just shrugged. "#couldbefiveminutes #couldbefivehours"

The Resistance Supreme Commander turned to Goldbug. "I want the command codes."

Goldbug's faceplate wasn't designed for expression, but his defiance blazed in the set of his optics. "~~~You can't always get what you want~~~" belted out Mick Jagger.

The nonplussed expression on the Maximal's face was its own reward, but he soon recovered his equilibrium. "Give them to me and I'll guarantee your safety."

The offer was tempting. But then he remembered all those ships, and the damage his batteries could do to them. "~~~Don't fear the reaper~~~" Lio Convoy stared into Goldbug's optics for many long nanokliks, then seemingly made a decision. An instant later, his fist connected with Goldbug's mouthplate, jarring loose sensitive microchips and disrupting neural impulses. As blackness took him, he wondered if his sacrifice would be enough.

V Plus 2.21 Solar Cycles
The Walls of Triax, Rageland

After less than four megacycles, the walls of Triax were crumbling. Despite the valiant effort of her personal army, they'd managed to evacuate less than a quarter of the

population of Praxus, and only about a third of Perihex. Those left behind became fodder for the Vehicon horde. The screams of the dying were steadily replaced with the emotionless—yet somehow bitter and full of hate—chant, "seek, locate, destroy."

When Queen Rage had come to power, some six stellar cycles earlier, Triax was one of the most heavily contested cities on the planet. She'd used her status as a Champion—the last Champion, in point of fact—to rally an army to her side. Builder and Resistance forces alike had attempted to wrest it from her grasp, but she proved too tenacious a foe. Even when the attempts to seize the city from her ceased, she continued to amass her forces, instituting conscription and stockpiling every piece of arms or armor she could get her servos on. It was quite possible Triax was the most heavily militarized city on Cybertron.

It wasn't going to be enough, she realized. Endless flights of aero drones soared overhead, attempting to breach her airspace. The anti-aircraft defenses churned lead and energy and depleted uranium and acid and forcebolts and coherent beams of light into the sky, and there was a literal rain of shattered Vehicon parts falling from the heavens. Tank drones amassed at her gates, pouring seemingly limitless blasts into her tempered tetrinite crenellations. The cycle drones probed the vast network of tunnels that ran under Triax, as they did everywhere on Cybertron; the Ancients built in *depth*. Her defenders fought on, valiantly, which filled her spark with pride. Moreover, the population, far from being cowed, ministered to the refugees from their neighboring cities, or formed bucket brigades for coolant and energon and ammunition.

"Another breach," screamed Manticon, and led her scant reserves to plug the gap. Rage rushed right with them, allowing her presence to bolster morale. When she arrived, she saw that it had been blown from underneath. Another one of the damned cycle drone had used itself as a suicide bomber, taking out the wall's foundation. Her soldiers rushed to put portable bulwarks—heavy but concentrated slugs, hexagonal when viewed on edge, that could transform into a modular section of nigh-impossible to breach wall—in place. Many of them died as tank drones shifted their fire from the wall to the gap, but despite the onslaught they covered the breach.

This time.

One of the troopers who had helped hold the line, a green Predacon with an enormous amphiboid head, lay dying on the ground, having taken a point-blank shot from one of the tank drones. Her other soldiers were too busy with the reality of combat to pay him any heed, so she leapt down from the wall and pulled him back a dozen mechanometers, outside of the most hectic zone of defense—although nowhere inside Triax could truly be described as calm.

His huge red eyes looked up at her and, after a moment, registered what he saw. "Your... your majesty," he croaked. "I'm... sorry I... failed you."

She rested her four-fingered left hand gently on his chest. "No, soldier. Your life was not given in failure, but in triumph. The Vehicons..." she tried to keep her voice from quavering, but did not entirely succeed. "The Vehicons have been driven back. This was

their last push, and you, noble warrior, you helped drive them back. The people of Triax owe you a debt."

A smile crept across his amphiboid features. "Thank you, your majesty." The light faded from his optics, and he died, turning gray. Rage grabbed the magnetic tags that she had all soldiers in her army wear and scanned the black and white squares embedded within. The soldier's name and rank came up: Springload, Corporal, #AC5000487105.

Rage stood and looked down at his corpse. The increasingly unwinnable battle stormed all around her, but she allowed herself a brief moment before returning to hold for as long as she could. "No, Springload," she whispered. "It was *I* who failed *you*."

V Plus 2.22 Solar Cycles
The Yuss Straits, The Great Rust Sea

The Resistance navy was probably the motliest band of scallywags ever assembled, mused Scylla. They'd used what little time they had to pull every fighter with an aquatic alt-mode to attempt to breach Iacon at the Straits of Yuss. Thousand more fighters were placed aboard the mode-locked Builders with seagoing alt-modes large enough to carry passengers. From the bridge of their flagship, the *Broadside*, she surveyed the landscape before her.

The Builders had hastily assembled a fleet of their own. At its center was the massive *Tidal Wave*. Though it was as mode-locked as the *Broadside*, they had doubtless left the original Decepticon intelligence intact, which would give them an edge in the upcoming battle. Of course, all of that might be moot if Lio Convoy didn't gain control of the Yuss Batteries in the next—she checked her internal chronometer—three cycles. She eyed the enormous guns and blanched at the thought of what they'd do to her fragile fleet.

V Plus 2.22 Solar Cycles
Yuss Batteries

#*futile!* No matter what Break tried, he couldn't circumvent the lockout codes the thrice-damned Micromaster had somehow managed to input. Even though Lio Convoy had

managed to seize the command & control center, the independently operated and targeted guns would soon blow their makeshift fleet out of the sea. They couldn't simply blow the guns, either, because using them to blast the Iacon-based batteries into submission was a critical part of the plan.

Without the Builder to coordinate their efforts, the defenders were falling more easily than before. But, from the increasing urgency of Lio Convoy's tone, he knew their forces weren't proceeding fast enough. A cracked monitor showed the inexorable advance of the Resistance fleet, which was now only two—TWO!—cycles outside of the maximum range of the Yuss guns.

"Hurry up, li'l guy," urged Quillfire, quite needlessly. The hulking mech had been pacing in a way that Break found quite distracting. He tried to keep his focus on the system in front of him. *#annoying*

Break had never before met a system he couldn't crack, and he was determined not to fail here. Despite his hacking skills—which were easily the best of any of the Resistance hacktivists—he knew he was something of a joke among the Resistance. Maybe it was the way he communicated; maybe it was his choice of alt-modes. He knew that he perceived the world… differently… than most of his fellows, but the whole point of the Resistance was to celebrate those differences, to get *away* from the stifling homogeneity of Class C vs Class F, to cast off the taint of functionist thinking… *#wasntit?* Break always thought so, but the way his so-called comrades mocked him when they didn't think he could hear—or even to his face—argued otherwise. But at least he'd always been able to contribute in this, his chosen arena.

Failure was unthinkable, might mean the death of their entire cause, and yet its icy fingers were scratching down the back of his neck. *#goosebumps.* Whatever limited cachet he'd built up, despite his differences—he absolutely refused to think of them as infirmities—would be lost, in the wake of this failure. He glanced over at the unconscious Builder and gave him a look of pure hate. Why, oh why, couldn't he have just given up the codes? His hardlines to the facility had been severed, it wasn't like he'd have to watch as…

#hardlines

Break kicked back from the keyboard, where he'd been frantically typing, and drifted over to where Goldbug had been wired into the facility. The security protocols for direct Builder interface had to be more lax than through a keyboard.

"Break, have you done it?" asked Lio Convoy, his voice wavering from the effort of keeping his emotions in check.

"#maybe #gimmieasec" Break replied. He knelt down next to the Builder's root trunk, pawing through the cables with a desperation. Then he popped open his own chest panel. "#hopethisworks!"

Lio Convoy realized what he was attempting a nanoklik too late. He started to say something, perhaps voice some objection, but Break ignored him and plunged in the

primary control circuit. He felt his overclocked CPU start to spark, experienced a kinesthesia that was disorienting but not entirely unpleasant. His entire consciousness became unmoored and started to drift away. Even as the last of his sense of self sputtered and evaporated into the ether, he attacked the problem of the lockout. *#gotit,* he thought. It was the last coherent thought he'd ever experience.

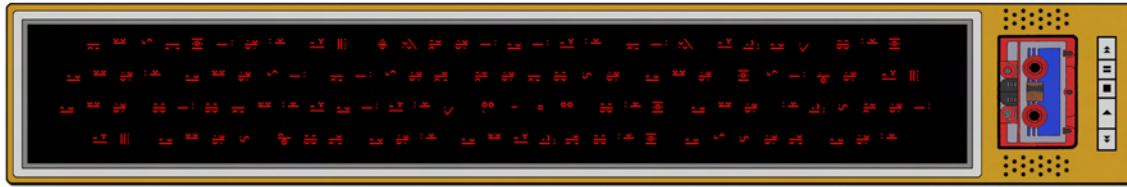*V Plus 2.23 Solar Cycles*
The Yuss Straits, The Great Rust Sea

Scylla gripped the railing of the *Broadside's* bridge as the guns of Yuss made minute adjustments. They were now only 45 nanokliks outside of their maximum range, and every one of them seemed to be straining towards her paltry vessels. She'd already sounded condition one, of course, but now she addressed her crew. "Hold onto yer afts, mateys, them bilge-spewing cannons ain't about to show us any quarter." She saw her Maximals and Predacons stiffen in their seats, but the overall atmosphere remained one of barely restrained aggression.

As the nanokliks ticked down, she found herself reminded of a verse from the Covenant of Primus: Yea, and the leviathan would rise from the sea, and its fury would be like unto the Inferno itself. Logos, chapter 10, verse 3. Funny, she hadn't really ever believed in that nonsense, but apparently some of the codebase stuck, because here it was, coming out just before her death.

With only 8 nanokliks to go, the guns abandoned their minute adjustments and swiveled hard to the north. After a few more adjustments, they began to fire… right at the heart of the distant Iacon-based batteries! Lio Convoy's voice bounced over the comm system. "We are clearing the way for you to the Trannis Fork River. Unfortunately, we only have limited control over the guns; they won't target the Builder fleet. We are counting on you to demolish the Builder navy."

Scylla smirked. "Aaarrrgh. They'll be recharging at Davy Jones' Locker come twilight!" She turned to her crew. "All right, mateys, set sail for yonder fleet."

If there had been a hint of sadness to Lio Convoy's voice despite the apparent good news, she didn't notice it.

V Plus 2.27 Solar Cycles
Contested Tesarus

"Come on, mechs and femmes," urged Steel Jaw. Their losses had been horrific—they'd lost a fifth of their own in the first few cycles. Storming the mine field was a costly endeavor, and once across they were easy pickings for the Builder's heavily fortified positions. There was a reason The Pack had never attempted a frontal assault unless the conditions heavily favored them, which they emphatically did not for this engagement.

Yes, the price had been high, but the oil they'd spilled over three megacycles of fighting had overrun the 74th's imposing—if somewhat hastily assembled—position. Erector was attempting to rally his troops, but Steel Jaw had no intention of allowing him to do so.

He ducked as a bomb went sailing over his head. The 74th still maintained air superiority, another factor that was costing him far more bots than he was comfortable with. "All reserve fliers in the air," belted out Ramulus, echoing Steel Jaw's own thoughts. "We need those Micromaster jets grounded now!"

With his second-in-command focused on the sky, Steel Jaw returned his attention to the ground. From his vantage point on the rim of a crater, he could see a host of Micromaster construction vehicles throwing up a fallback line. In their haste they were mixing and matching, with the front-halves detaching from the back to pair with different vehicles, an odd ability that was allowing them to work twice as fast as they should.

"With me!" he shouted, and converted to his luponoid form. He felt the weight of fifty or so of the Pack at his back, charging the Micromaster work crew.

He never saw the shot that felled him.
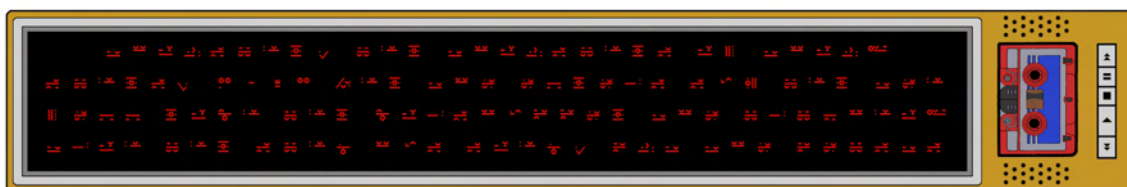
V Plus 2.31 Solar Cycles
The Yuss Straits, The Great Rust Sea

"They're closing in," drawled Cradon, at the sensor station. "Vectah two-three-niner by four-two-eight."

Banzai-Tron could of course, access this information directly, through his hardline to *Tidal Wave*, but in his experience verbal reporting encouraged vigilance and kept a subliminal tactical awareness spread among his other officers. "As the ax goes through the tree, so do they seek to drive a wedge through our formation."

"Should I order our forward elements back?" asked Long Arm, at communications. Razor-Sharp, the vicious little decapodian who served as the ship's mascot, was curled up by his feet.

"Negative. Instead open a channel to our subsea elements. They seek to be the ax; let them instead be the wallowing dinosaur, blundering into the tar pit."

"Enemy fleet, holding steady," announced Gigascouter, her first mate, from the tactical station.

"Are they now?" asked Scylla. "Banzai-Tron be too canny a foe to blindly let us cleave him in twain. What are ye up to?"

She meandered over to Gigascouter's board, but it showed exactly what the purple mech had said. "Hmmm… ah! I'll wager doubloons to shillings he be meaning to strike us from below."

Gigascouter nodded. "I'll have the craft prepare an undersea firing solution to keep them off our hulls."

"Belay that, ye bilge-monkey. Let them get in close. This will be a costly blunder for yon Builder navy." She paused for effect. "Have the fleet shift their energy barriers to below the waterline, but they are to keep power concentrated on defensive measures until I say otherwise, lessin' they want to be keelhauled. And get me Cybershark."

It might seem absurd for a body of water 15 hics wide and a quarter hic deep to seem cramped, but to Diveplane, it was. There just too much that could go wrong, and too little room to maneuver when it did. Still, she had to admit, Banzai-Tron might be onto something by ordering the undersea forces to strike. Her own Deep Sea Micromaster

Patrol, each one with a submarine mode identical to her own, was now close enough that their vibro-pings were 'seeing' the bottom hulls of the Resistance fleet. The composition of the Rust Sea didn't allow for traditional sonar and was far too dense to allow the tepid light of Hadean to reach more than a couple of mechanometers. It took a special kind of courage to operate in its stygian depth.

"Close to torpedo range and engage on my mark," she ordered, and her three companions followed, as did the other 33 subsea Micromasters. "And maintain defensive formation! We don't know what's down here."

At the vanguard of the Resistance Fleet, Katilla piloted the captured Autobot destroyer *Drydock*. He'd gotten his orders from the *Broadside*, but couldn't say that he understood them. In truth, he didn't especially relish being at the very front of the fleet. No, he was more of a middle-of-the-pack kinda cybercat, content to let others take the biggest risks. When Scylla was handing out assignments, she had told him it was because of his reflexes and tactical thinking; privately, he suspected it was just good, old-fashioned anti-Maximalism on the part of an uppity Predacon. Despite what Lio Convoy said about this being a post-factional movement, Katilla couldn't help but notice how many of his top commanders were Maximals, nor how the top Preds tended to walk off the job. And, truth be told, Katilla had no problem with that. Today the Builders, tomorrow the Preds.

A few nanokliks urgent beeping was all the warning the *Drydock* gave him before an explosion rocked his world, knocking him from his feet. When he hauled himself back to the controls, he saw that he'd indeed been struck from below. Nuts and bolts to his orders, if they were striking at him he'd defend himself! He readied the ship's undersea ripslinger charges, shifting energy from the enhanced hull-integrity to the weapons systems, when the beeping started again. He froze, torn between diving into the sea, pressing the button that would launch the attack, and pressing the button that would shift auxiliary power back to the defensive systems.

His hesitation ensured that he'd do none of the above; the Falcon Spear torpedo that slammed into the *Drydock*'s undercarriage caused the ship to explode in a fireball visible from Yuss to the shores of Iacon.
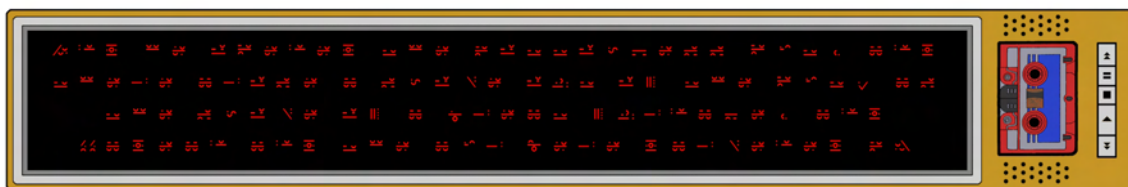
"Lost one!" reported Gigascouter, even as the noise of a third explosion rippled through the *Broadside*. "The… *Drydock*."

"Hold steady," Scylla ordered, projecting a calm she did not feel. "We'll be letting them get totally committed before we send Cybershark the signal."

"Got one," enthused Seawave, with her typically unflappable energy. Indeed, chucks of wreckage were sinking down. Astro-Sinker started to break formation to avoid, so Diveplane switched to a private channel to chastise him. He dutifully returned to formation and used one of his torpedoes to break up the wreckage before it could threaten his hull integrity.

"Odd that it's only one," pinged Deepdive. "We only hit that one twice, most of the rest we've hit five or six times. You suppose they put a damaged ship in the lead?"

Diveplane thought about that for a moment. "No, Deepdive, I doubt they did. And I don't like it one bit. We need to knock more of these ships out of the battle. Close with the flagship and concentrate your fire." Then, just in case, she sent an energy-intensive tachyon burst to Tidal Wave, warning that the Resistance may have anticipated the undersea attack, and hoped it cut through both the heavy metals of the Rust Sea and the enormous energy output of their own weapons fire.
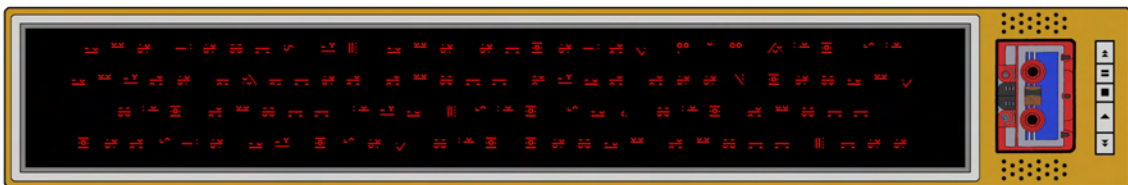
The mood on *Tidal Wave*'s bridge was one of restrained optimism. "Resistance fleet, holding speed and position despite taking heavy fire," reported Cradon. "Lead destroyah sunk. Explosions reported on at least twenty of the others. Damage unknown."

"Excellent," mused Banzai-Tron. "Once their formation breaks, we shall fall upon them like locustors on a field."

Then a puzzled look crossed Long Arm's face. "Repeat, Diveplane. Tidal Wave does *not* copy!"

Banzai-Tron frowned. It was expensive to try to transmit through the Rust Sea, even if one wasn't in the middle of a raging inferno of exploding torpedoes. Whatever she was

attempting to communicate, he had to assume it was beyond urgent. "Long Arm," he ordered, "reposition the fleet to support our subsea elements."

"But sir," he argued, "that will leave us vulnerable!"

"I fear Scylla has left us no choice; we must dance to the symphony she orchestrates now."
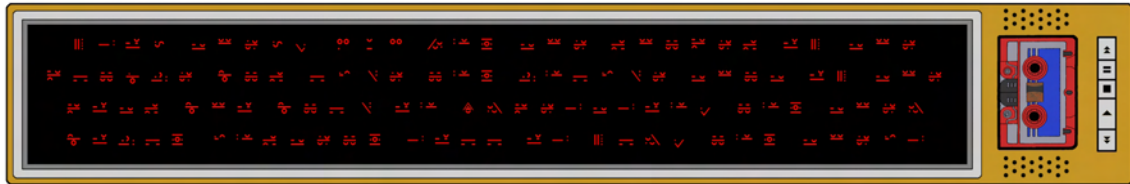
"Looks like… Ma'am, looks like the surface vessels are adjusting position, moving into a support formation. I estimate it will take them one point eight cycles to complete this maneuver."

"Excellent. That's one point eight cycles we won't be giving them. And the scurvy subsea swine?"

Gigascouter turned back to his instruments. "The subsea fleet is focusing their fire on us. They continue to approach… they are nearly at point-blank range. Just… 30 more nanokliks."

"Arrrrggh! Perfect." Scylla allowed a huge grin to creep across her face. "Pass the word, all ships to switch aux power from defense to offense. And take Cybershark off his leash. He's been patient for far too long, wouldn't ye be sayin'?"

Gigascouter mirrored her grin. "I would indeed, Ma'am."

"Keep at it," urged Diveplane. "Once the *Broadside* is sunk, this battle is over!" She could 'see' that the *Broadside* was heating up, her engines straining to keep up with the tremendous amounts of energy being disgorged into her hull. No matter how much of her output they directed into the structural integrity of the hull, sooner or later it would breach.

Then the depths erupted. Directed energy from all of the other Resistance ships began to fire into her position. The Rust Sea dissipated much of it, but it could still add up if not addressed. "All Micromasters," she ordered, "break formation! Take evasive maneuvers!"

They did so, and most of the energy beams lanced harmlessly through the sludge. She was about to order a return to formation when she found herself grappled by orange and purple tentacles. Her conning tower snapped off, rendering her unable to communicate. All around her, oxide sharks, m-rays, warwhales, and the like blitzed the distracted elements that had, until a few nanokliks ago, been her fleet. She attempted to convert to her humanoid form, but a strange lassitude came over her, and she ceased her struggles. *My energon is being drained*, she realized, but couldn't summon the will to care about it, nor could she stop herself from being stuffed into the beak of the undersea horror that was Claw Jaw as he cracked her superstructure in half and discarded the lifeless pieces.

"Cybershark reports 95% success," reported Gigascouter, unable to keep the excitement from his voice. "Only two of them escaped, and they're limping back towards the main Builder fleet. Cybershark is in pursuit."

"Of course he be!" declared Scylla. "And now for the real prize."

The Resistance fleet was getting closer and closer, even as Flattop tried to maneuver his carrier, the *Platonix*, per Banzai-Tron's orders. He hoped the Macromaster knew what he was doing—right now it looked as if the Resistance fleet was going to split the Builder fleet in two and pick them off at their leisure.

Then he spotted an arm trying to claw its way up his ship. Without thinking, he fired at it, realizing a nanoklik too late that it was a Micromaster, rather than a Maximal or Predacon, attempting to climb from the vast ocean of rust. He cringed a bit, and resolved not to report this little bit of friendly fire.

Then he got to wondering exactly what had driven one of his undersea fellows to try to get out of the water. The *Platonix* lurched as something struck it from below, and he realized he had a pretty good idea what it might be. The ship shook again, and he thought about directing his ship's x-ray lasers below, but then the vessel adjacent to him in formation exploded. He swiveled his head, and the ominous bow of a Resistance battleship came back into view.

Frag it, he decided, and shifted the *Platonix* into its aerial configuration and flew away.
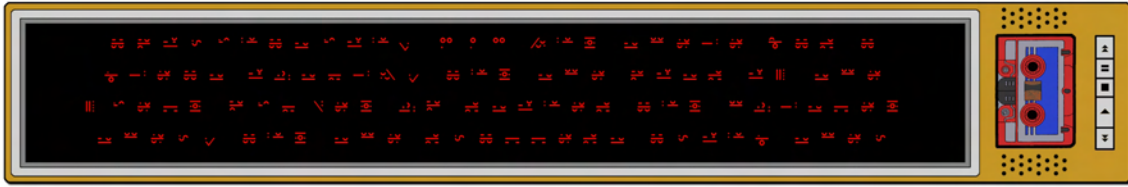
"Tidal Wave! Tidal Wave!" changed their ship defiantly, for all the good it did. *Broadside* and her attendant vessels had indeed driven their wedge through the Builder fleet, aided by their own subsea elements. Half Banzai-Tron's fleet was ablaze or sunk. Now his remaining ships were outnumbered, and having to split their attention between the surface and subsea vessels. Many were either withdrawing or surrendering.

Broadside was closing in, her guns blazing relentlessly. One of the *Tidal Wave*'s gun batteries exploded, its magazine hit, and the screams of the dying competed with the bedlam of battle for Banzai-Tron's attention.

"Sir," reported Reachout from navigation, "we just lost our port engine."

For Starhook, his weapons officer, this was apparently the last straw. "Damnit, sir, we have to strike the colors. We can't win this fight!"

Banzai-Tron regarded him with a long, hard stare. "Razor-Sharp," he barked, and the creature came to attention on its six orange legs. "Eviscerate him."

Starhook's jaw dropped in astonishment, and then the beast had leapt onto his back. Her claws neatly severed his head from his neck, and the slack-jawed expression rolled to a stop at Cradon's feet.

"I said eviscerate, not decapitate, but this will have to do." Banzai-Tron looked to the remaining three members of his bridge crew. "If there are no more tactical suggestions, then I'll need a new weapons officer. Long Arm?"

The Micromaster glanced at the down at the still-sparking head, so much like his own, and slipped from communications to weapons.

"Excellent. Just as the *Tidal Wave* represents a disproportionate percentage of our fleet's tonnage, so too does the *Broadside*. Starhook's observation, that we cannot win the fight, was accurate, but his analysis that surrender was the best solution was… faulty. Reachout, set a collision course with the *Broadside*." He paused, and attempted to regain his equilibrium. "As the setting sun brings forth night, so too shall our sacrifice spell the twilight of the Resistance fleet."

The battle was going well—very well. They'd only lost seven of their own ships, and two of them might be salvageable. The enemy fleet, meanwhile, was in tatters, with 22 vessels destroyed, surrendered, or running. Only 5 remained combat-effective, to 13 of their own.

Unfortunately, one of the five was the *Tidal Wave*. While he was on the board, their victory was still in doubt. "Gigascouter, let's be having the *Undertow* and the *Sea Spray* break off their assaults on that yonder cruiser. Me thinks the Depthcharge can handle that particular bleedin' whale. I want the crew of the Tidal Wave feedin' the fishes afore seven bells."

"Aye aye," acknowledged her second. But then, he took a half-step back from his control board. "Ma'am, *Tidal Wave* is on a collision course. She'll impact us in… two point three cycles!"

"All power to weapons," she ordered, with an edge she couldn't quite keep out of her voice. "Stop that boat!"

Volley after volley thundered into the *Tidal Wave* as it forged on ahead, through shot and shell. Many of her crew, seeing the inevitable conflagration they were about to invite, leapt over the side, though almost none had aquatic modes. Others stayed at their posts, firing weapons in a last, futile act of defiance to echo that of the ship itself. "Tidal Wave! Tidal Wave!" boomed the ship itself, embracing this final sacrifice with the whole of its being. Gigantic chunks of armor were vaporized as it directed its limited energies to propulsion, knowing that sheer momentum and the titanic mass of the vessel would do more damage to the *Broadside* than its own guns ever could.

Its progress was ponderous but inexorable. On the ruined bridge, Reachout and Long Arm lay dead, killed by a shell that had struck the sensor array atop the ship's island. Cradon was missing his left arm, but stayed at his post, keeping what few eyes the ship had left focused on his prize. There was some kind of fluid, energon or coolant maybe, dripping down over Banzai-Tron's face. It gave the world a surreal, winedark quality. Razor-Sharp, perhaps sensing the end, curled up in Banzai-Tron's lap. For a nanoklik he regretted that he didn't have the mobility to reach down and stroke the savage creature.

"Like a meteor hurtling through the heavens, our orbit and yours shall collide, and shatter a hundred hundred sparks!"
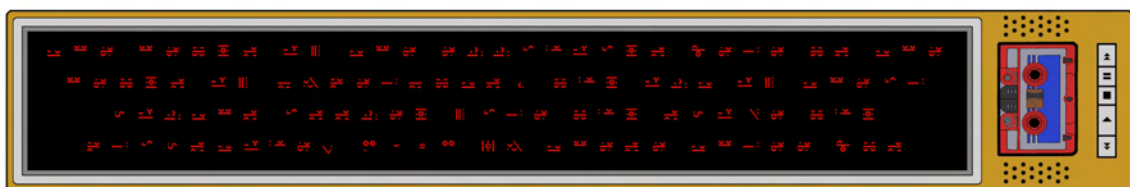
"We can't stop her!" cried Gigascouter, his voice on the border of panic. What was worse was that Scylla couldn't blame him. The *Broadside* was almost a quarter of the Resistance's tonnage and carried half her fighters. Most of them couldn't survive more than a few cycles in the unforgiving Rust Sea. But her fleet still controlled the channel, which gave them a chance; to be aboard the *Broadside* when she was struck would offer them none. The collision was now only 80 nanokliks away.

Her hand heavy, she keyed the shipwide intercom. "All sailors, all marines… abandon ship. This be not a drill." It was as if a weight lifted from her shoulders. She knew most of the soldiers she was carrying wouldn't survive, but some would manage. She toggled a switch and opened a channel to Cybershark. "Arrrr, the fleet be yours now, Cybershark. Take good care of her. There'll be some 700 soldiers and 150 sailors in the sea, save as many as ye can. *Broadside* out."

There was an angry rumble over the noise of the battle. After a moment, her audio sensors made out what it was: "Tidal Wave! Tidal Wave!" She shook her head in bemusement.

Gigascouter, still at his post, was directing as many bots as possible to the emergency buoys. "I gave ye an order, bucko. You're no longer welcome on my ship."

He ignored her and continued to bark orders, his fingers flying across his station, trying to save as many lives as possible. There was only 20 nanokliks left, and the bow of the *Tidal Wave* loomed amidships like some angry mountain god. "I'm sorry, Ma'am. For the first—and last—time, I find myself unable to obey your orders."

She wiped a tear from her optic and walked over to his station. He was taller than she, and she reached up to put an arm on his shoulder. "Well, ye filthy mutineer, I guess ye'll be walkin' the plank afore nightfall."

He turned to her and opened his mouth to say something, but at that moment the two largest naval vessels on Cybertron collided. The sound of metal on metal was deafening, but it was the *Broadside*'s reactor going critical that sent a mushroom cloud billowing into the sky, obliterating every bot still aboard both vessels and hundreds in the nearby water.

The battle for the Straits of Yuss was over.

V Plus 2.37 Solar Cycles
Contested Tesarus

The dead and dying lay strewn about like the discarded toys of some human toddler. The air was full of smoke and dust and the acrid smell of poisonous gas, dispersed enough to not be lethal but not enough to entirely hide the stench.

Eventually, of course, numbers prevailed. The Builders had fought with tenacity and honor—Erector always had been a worthy foe, one who understood that there were things that were and weren't done even in war—but in the end none of that mattered. The 74th was overwhelmed, broken and scattered. Pockets of it no doubt still existed, but squads were running them down even as Ramulus walked through the carnage.

The Pack had lost two thirds of its strength. His best estimate was that he had fewer than 8,000 bots combat effective. Perhaps 1,500 might be repaired, given a few decacycles. But over fifteen thousand had paid the ultimate price. Of the 74th, seven in ten had been destroyed, with another thousand or so surrendered.

The butcher's bill was high that day. And it included a mech that Ramulus had always figured for immortal. He'd miss Steel Jaw, as would every Maximal and Predacon who'd had the honor of serving under their extraordinary commander. Erector, too, was among the dead, slain by a small brown Maximal called Diablo who struck while cloaked.

Ramulus knew that Steel Jaw had hoped to share an engex with Erector, after the conflict was over. They'd played nemesis to each other for stellar cycles. Alas, it was not to be.

He turned to a tall Maximal he'd recognized as part of the wireless corps. "Send a coded dispatch to Lio Convoy. Report that the road to Iacon is open. The Pack needs two megacycles to care for its wounded and properly secure our prisoners, and then we press on to the heart of the Builders.

V Plus 2.41 Solar Cycles
The Walls of Triax, Rageland

The seventh breach was the worst one yet. The generator powering a two-hic stretch of fortifications blew without warning, and suddenly the defenders found themselves without the energy shields and heavy weapons they had been using to beat back the Vehicons. A huge pseudo-pod of them surged inward, a tide of drones that simply swept past the defenders.

"To me!" cried Rage, as she gathered up a cadre of civilians who had armed themselves with whatever tools and innate weapons systems they had been protoformed with. They rushed forward, destroying scores of Vehicons. Hundreds even. Each fight was to the death, each grapple put the valiant combatant on the knife's edge between life and nothingness. Somehow, impossibly, through sheer grit, they pushed the mass of Vehicons back, their own wreckage forming a makeshift barricade.

This was it, she realized. This herculean effort represented the very last of her reserves. The next breach would prove decisive. She turned back to Triax, scanning her city, soaking in one last view of its splendor. Her optics lingered on the gleaming spire of the royal palace.

The royal palace. Behind its ramparts, a small garrison could fend off an army ten times its size. She climbed to the top of the makeshift barricade that was all standing between her people and annihilation and amplified her voice. "People! People! Despite the valiant effort of my soldiers, the walls of Triax cannot hold. We shall stay here for as long as we can, to buy you time with our very sparks. Use it wisely! Go to the royal palace. When the walls finally tumble, we shall endeavor to join you there. That shall be the site of our last stand!"

Despite it all, it took them a moment. They stared up at her, backlit by the explosions of a thousand Vehicons, and for a long moment she thought they'd refuse, they'd stay here. But then the first of them, perhaps more intrepid than the others, or perhaps simply terrified, broke from the crowd and started towards the palace. In less than a cycle, the

crowd broke, shoving and pushing their way towards whatever limited safety the palace would provide.

"Well said, my Queen," Manticon solemnly remarked. Rage gave him a nod, then turned back to the seething mass of Vehicons and unleashed blast after blast from her medusozoa cannon.

V Plus 2.64 Solar Cycles
Trannis Fork River, Iacon

The colossal shadow of the ruins of the twin Trannis Fork Batteries, pounded to scrap by the more powerful Yuss Batteries from across the straits, loomed large. The last of the Army of the Resistance was disembarking from the remaining destroyers and cruisers and frigates of the bruised and battered—but very much intact—Resistance Navy. Their plan had been to use the ships to take the Trannis Fork to central Iacon, saving valuable time, but the last, desperate act of Banzai-Tron had sent that stratagem to the bottom of the Great Rust Sea, along with nearly half of the Resistance Navy's tonnage. What ships they had would best serve as mobile artillery platforms, to support the army as they wend their way to Iacon the old fashioned way—on foot.

Row after row of troopers were assembled by their sergeants into platoons, by their lieutenants into companies, by their Captains into battalions, by their colonels into regiments, and finally by Lio Convoy's own hand-picked generals into brigades, ten thousand mechs strong each. Altogether, Lio Convoy commanded an army of 70,000 sparks, supported by another 5,000 or so sailors, preparing to embark on this, the decisive battle of Grand Uprising. All around the globe, his other armies pressed their own attacks. Those close enough to have a shot at Iacon, such as Tesarus and Vos, were advancing as fast as they were able, heedless of costs. Those in more distant theaters also had orders to engage the Builder armies, though their objective as simply to keep the Builders pinned down and unable to withdraw.

It was magnificent. It was terrible. It was war.

From the direction of the S Brigade, which called themselves the Singularities, came Blackarachnia. Her usual saunter was gone, replaced by a martial quick-step. He wondered if she was doing it consciously or merely being her usual adaptive self. "All Brigades report ready to march, Supreme Commander."

He offered her a warm clasp on the shoulder. "Thank you, old friend. I couldn't have come this far without you."

Now her usual sultry self came to the fore. "And don't you forget it, Aslan," she quipped with a wink. "Are you planning to address the troops?" He thought for a moment and nodded. In a few moments, scrambling aids put together a small platform and managed to rig a holo-projector to his face.

The never-ending din of soldiers muted somewhat as a twenty story tall projection of Lio Convoy's visage filled the shores. He made a point of looking left and right, sweeping all of the assembled mechs and femmes who had already risked much, and were now about to march into the heart of their enemy.

"Today," he began abruptly, with no preamble. "Today we have done what has never been done before. We have conquered the Maxilla, bent the Yuss Batteries to our purpose, and shattered the back of the Builder Navy. Today, we own the Great Rust Sea." He paused, and the troopers gave a dutiful cheer. "But it's not enough. What little we can learn from our own territory is that the Builder abominations, the Vehicons, are despoiling those we've left behind. Our spark brothers and sisters, our neighbors, our lovers, our friends." The mood started to sour. Many of his troops didn't want to think about that. Too bad. "They represent everything rotten and wrong and evil about the Builder Assembly, about the class system, about those who wear the red and purple badges of shame!" The anger started to rise, and he stoked it. "They are why we march today, and not tomorrow. There is no surrender, no retreat. This is a fight not just for our way of life, but for our very existence." Now the cheers began again, first scattered, then in earnest. "We! Are! On! The! Shores! Of! IACON!!! There is nothing between us and the assembly but their last, pathetic reserves of Micromasters. We will smash them to scrap, we will storm the High Pavilion, and we will WIN!" Now the roar of his soldiers was deafening. "TO IACON!"

It took the officers several cycles to restore order and get the troops marching, but Lio Convoy considered it time well spent.
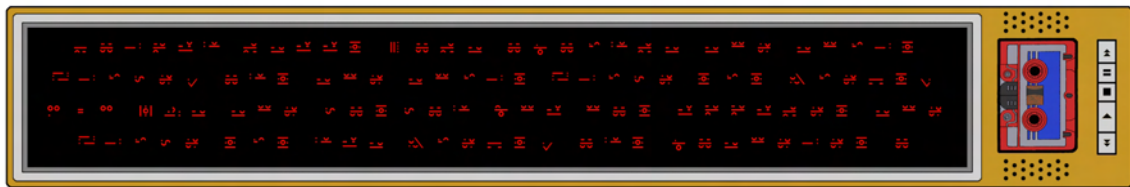
V Plus 2.73 Solar Cycles
The Cortex, Thetacon

"The Maximal filth and Predacon scum are breaking through all over!" ranted Ratbat. Eject wanted to punch him in the face. "Yuss has fallen, Banzai-Tron's fleet has been shattered, Tesarus has broken, Proximax is in Predacon hands, and the Maximals have Plurex! Oh, and most of those cities are above the arctic circle, in case you haven't realize it."

"It's not all bad news," began Galva Convoy smoothly. "The Vehicons now control 70% of Resistance territory, including what's left of Protihex, the Tri-Torus region, Altihex, Petrex, Burthov—which, come to think of it, is technically Predacon territory. Where was I? Oh,

yes, they've also got Helex, Rodion, and Corumkan. There's heavy fighting still in Rageland and they've just moved on to Harmonex, K'th Kinsere, Median, and Ibex."

"That doesn't do us any good if the Resistance is literally marching through the streets of Iacon—he's only megacycles away from here, and we have only token forces to throw at him! " He waved his hand about in a gesture encompassing the entire room. "It doesn't do us any good to have wiped out their territory if they're busy squatting in ours."

Galva Convoy put his right hand on his chest, finger splayed, and gave a deferential half-bow. "I'm sorry, my lord, the Vehicons can only operate as per their programming. They *will* conquer everything short of latitude 66, probably within the next two solar cycles. But they are limited by their operational parameters. In the end, perhaps that is the safest thing for a weapon so potent, so new."

"Nuts and bolts to safety," spat Ratbat. "I move the vote. We revoke General Order 66, effective immediately."

"Hey, time out!" cried Eject, but even as he did so there was a chorus of voices saying "second."

"The vote is moved," declared Ratbat. "I vote aye."

"Aye," said Octus.

"Aye," said Kudon.

"Aye," said Traachon.

"Aye," said Avalon. With each successive vote, Eject's spirits sank.

"Aye," said Contrail, bringing the measure more than halfway to passing.

"Nay," said Riker, the first voice of dissent.

"Nay," said Cross-Cut, and Ejects' hopes started to rise.

"Aye," said Sigil, breaking the trend.

"Aye," said Tomaandi.

"Nay," said Sherma, which surprised Eject. He was among the more hawkish of the assemblybots.

"Nay," agreed Mindgame, another surprise. Only one more nay was needed to defeat the measure.

"Aye," said Halogen.

"I think…" began Decimus, who then trailed off, appearing lost in thought. After a protracted silence, he looked up. "Nay," he said, solemnly. "I cannot in good conscience sanctify this motion." Only one more nay was needed to defeat the measure.

"Aye," said Xeon firmly, bringing the measure to one vote shy of passing.

All eyes turned to Knock-Out, the final vote. "Well," he purred. "Since we need a 2/3 majority, it looks as if I have the deciding vote. He made a show of studying his own fingernails, which might have been more effective if he didn't need to rely on an exo-walker to do it. "I'm inclined to say no. After all, my own initiative re: tax credits for automotive racing was defeated by several of you voting aye right now." Eject felt himself falling into a pit of despair. Knock-Out owned some of the finest racetracks on the planet; Eject had enjoyed many of his races, particularly the Ibex Cup. Of course, back then the world wasn't on fire.

"You vainglorious fool!" shouted Cross-Cut, echoing Eject's own private thoughts. "You're equinoid-trading *now*?"

"When better?" retorted Knock-Out. "Well, Ratbat? What say you?"

"You'll get your tax credits," grimaced Ratbat. "If we survive." There were nods among those who had voted yes. It was clear that most were swallowing an equal measure of distaste for the fop.

"Then I vote aye," he twinkled.

"The vote is carried, 11 to 5," declared Ratbat, his voice trembling with what could be anger, or triumph, or trepidation. "Unlock the code."

"Acknowledged," came the feminine voice of the council's private computer system, the most secure network on the entire planet. An awareness of the code on the LAN pinged into Eject's systems, along with everyone else holographically linked in. Including Galva Convoy.

"I'll see that Vehicon reinforcements make their way to Iacon at once, councilors," said Galva Convoy, his voice deferential. His hologram winked out of existence, followed by those of most of the other councilors. In nanokiks, only Ratbat remained.

"You created this weapon, Eject. Let's not be overly sentimental about using it."

"I just pray we haven't backed the wrong horse," said Eject, knowing deep in his compressor that they had. As the signal winked out, he slowly made his way out of his office. "Slog, get my helicopter," he ordered. "I need to speak with Hot Rod. In person."

Rageland had fallen; the Royal Palace was a lonely outcropping, besieged by an ocean of Vehicons. Fewer than one in ten of the civilians had crammed inside its walls, and yet it was packed so densely that bots could barely move. "Any bots who can mass-shift smaller, please convert to alt form now," implored Flytrap, though few were complying for fear of getting trapped or trampled. The impact of tank drone fire on the palace shields had turned from a staccato pounding to an omnipresent rumble.

Another tower blew—the third out of eight—and collapsed into the courtyard, crushing hundreds. Still, mused Rage, it was a better fate than they might have otherwise hoped for. Her own arm cannon had exploded from overuse, robbing her of her right hand. She'd picked up a grey-green rifle that looked as if it had been part of an integrated weapons package and was firing it awkwardly from her left. Fortunately—if that was the right word—there were so many Vehicons that one scarcely needed to aim.

One of the cycle drones climbed up the back of the writhing mass of tank drones and leapt at her. Her reflexes, dulled by megacycles of battle, failed her, and the purple thing knocked her down. It was a miracle she remained on the wall, but it would be of little solace if the thing managed to kill her. She tried to maneuver the stump of her right arm between her vulnerable chest area and the pinching, snapping claws that heralded her execution by transmutation. She willed herself to find some hidden reserve of strength, but there was just nothing left. A lone talon reached her chest and started to scratch down, as slowly and inexorably as death itself.

Then an orange blur knocked the thing off of her. "Get away from my queen, you scraphead," roared Manticon, as he pummeled the thing into rubble. Then he turned to her and offered her a weary hand. She took it, gratefully, and he pulled her to her feet.

"Thanks," she started to say, when he grimaced in pain and his limbs pulled back, taut with pain. One of the hovering jet drones had punctured his back, and before her horrified optics he started to reconfigure into a tank drone. He grimaced, then let loose the most pained wail she'd ever heard. She knew she should kill him, now, before he was lost forever, but the weight of so many other deaths crushed down upon her, and she watched in mute horror as her longest and most stalwart friend and ally vanished.

His head was the last thing to reconfigure, and when it did, the single tracking eye fixed on her. "Seek, locate, *destroy!*" It raised a fist as if to smash her, and she almost welcomed oblivion. But then a strange thing happened. It cocked its head, as if listening to some distant message. The dull thunder of weapons fire stopped, and the Vehicons turned as one and began to roll, march, and fly north. An exhausted cry of relief came from the crowd her decimated soldiers had been working so hard to defend.

Flytrap hurried to where she stood. "It's a miracle, your majesty!"

She watched the back of what had once been Manticon as it marched into the crowd, fixing him with her gaze until it she could no longer distinguish him from his identical fellows. The tanks drones were shifting to their vehicle configurations, and were then picked up by trios of wedge-formation jet drones and carried off into the sky.

"Maybe it is, Flytrap," she heard herself say, her voice profoundly weary. "But I can't help but think that what we've witnessed is a mere foretaste of the bleak future to come."

Part 3 - Frozen in the Flow of the Cocytus

V Plus 2.83 Solar Cycles
Trannis Fork River, Iacon

"It's as you thought, sirah," reported Blackout, in her usual thick accent. "The main bulk of Lio Convoy's forces and reserves are headed our way."

"You get a good look at them?" Hot Rod asked her, knowing what the answer would be. He and his command team was assembled in the base mode of the Landshaker, Groundshaker's ATV. He idly fidgeted with the holo-disk in his hand, which was on stand-by for Assemblybot Ratbat.

"We did our best, sirah," answered Spaceshot, "but anti-aircraft fire was heavy. We lost half our squad and still only got a peek. Still, I'd say… between fifty and a hundred thousand strong, supported by maybe half a dozen vessels making their way up the river."

Hot Rod let out a low whistle. He'd thrown everything he had at the front lines; he'd had no other choice. Now that those fronts were breaking, he had precious little left in the tank. Drillbuster had helpfully called up a holo-map, and Hot Rod stared at it with blank optics, looking for somewhere, anywhere, where they might stop Lio Convoy.

"Countdown, how many combat effectives do we have?" he asked.

The red and white Autobot looked thoughtful. "Including Cyberdroids, 17,000. We were hoping to link up with the 42nd, pulling back from Thetacon, but they ran into The Pack along the Gyronian River. No help there."

The disk in his hand beeped, and Hot Rod lifted it to his face. Ratbat's image frizzed into being. "Are your worthless forces ready?" the Decepticon demanded.

Hot Rod thought back to a time he'd twisted Ratbat's wing off, in a parking garage on old Earth. The memory made him smile briefly, but then it fled. When had it all gone so wrong? He forced his mind back to the present. "Once again, I'd like to repeat my objection. Our usual contact on the Assembly is Assemblybot Riker."

"Your objection is preserved for the record," sneered Ratbat. "Now, stop wasting my time and start wasting Lio Convoy's! Our reinforcements are on their way, so all you need to do is slow him down. Even outnumbered five to one you should be able to manage that.

Drillbuster tapped a finger on the holomap nervously. "You're assuming that their objective is the Pavilion."

"Of course I'm assuming that," screeched Ratbat.

"Right," continued the blue Autobot. "But there's little natural geography between the Resistance army and the Assembly. Nothing but houses, businesses, factories, warehouses. No one big place to make a stand."

"He's right," agreed Hot Rod. "Assemblybot, with respect, we threw everything at the front, and they broke it. We don't have the equipment to stand against a marching army."

The look of fury on Ratbat's tiny holographic face could have stopped a razor snake from striking. "Don't be such a fool, *Chosen One*! There may not be a convenient mountain range or sonic chasm or whatever between Lio Convoy and the Pavilion, but there are *tens of thousands* of structures in the way, along the roads. Put one or two troopers in each one, with a rifle, and start taking potshots. They can either ignore you, in which case you get to inflict lots of free casualties, or they can level the city as they go, in which case their march slows down for long enough for the Vehicons to save your sorry skidplates."

"But sirah," objected Blackout, "We don't have time to evacuate those buildings. When the Resistance starts shooting back—"

"And they will," her sister added.

"—we'll be putting civilians in harm's way," she finished.

"Do I look like I care about civilian casualties?" ranted Ratbat, spittle flying from his face.

"Even then," began Countdown matter-of-factly, "in my experience it's far easier to disperse an army than it is to forge it back together. If we scatter and commit to guerilla warfare, then we don't have an organized fighting force anymore."

"What is the use of an organized fighting force that can't stand up to the enemy?" wailed Ratbat. "This debate is over. My orders are clear. Scatter your forces, throw your bodies into Lio Convoy's war machine, and slow them down for the two to three megacycles we need for the Vehicons to come and do your damn job for you!"

Hot Rod looked into the optics of each of his commanders. Each one gave a barely perceptible nod. "Assemblybot, I'm sorry, the signal is very weak. I'm afraid I didn't catch most of that. In my judgment our forces shall fall back in an organized manner, linking up with as many of the scattered units from the other fronts as possible in central Iacon. This will give us maximum flexibility while disincentivizing the Resistance from destroying our infrastructure and causing needless casualties among noncombatants."

"You traitorous vat of effluence! I'll have your head for this!" blustered Ratbat.

"Again, did not copy. I'll see you in central Iacon. Hot Rod out." He pressed the button to terminate the holoconference, causing Assemblybot Ratbat and his tirade to wink out of existence.

"Sirah!" began Spaceshot. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?" The look of concern in her eyes was genuine.

"Nope. But if I have to wreck the city in order to save it, then maybe we're fighting on the wrong side." As Hot Rod began issuing orders, preparing to fall back well in advance of the

Resistance march, he felt an unusual lightness in his step. A knot of tension that had been a constant companion for decades, maybe centuries, had vanished.

V Plus 2.89 Solar Cycles
Upper Ky-Alexia

"Oh, well done," enthused Hydraulic, Micromaster general in command of the 56th. He'd thought the Assembly crazy when he'd been forced to evacuate Lower Ky-Alexia, ceding the valuable Mithril Sea to the Resistance, but when the big Resistance push came less than a decacycle later, he'd had plenty of troops with which to push back. He certainly couldn't fault the courage of the Resistance soldiers, who had kept coming despite the odds, but ultimately they'd been forced to abandon their artillery and flee, with him dispatching his cavalry and half his air cover to pursue and harass. Sky-Dive's forces had been well and truly broken, and he'd be skewered on Mortilus' spiked carapace before he'd allow the Tol-Tech to reform.

"Sir," cried Heavy Tread, looking up from his wireless set. "I'm getting reports of activity from the west… massive activity!"

"The west? Impossible! The Tol-Tech were driven *east*!" He stopped to collect himself. The Maximal Nation was to the east, but it seemed unlikely they'd get involved in his little corner of the war. Then he considered the source. "This better not be one of your pranks, 'Tread."

Heavy Tread looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. "Sir, we're winding down the biggest battle of the war the 56th has ever seen, have suffered heavy casualties, but have managed to seize a rare victory against the Resistance. Do you think now is when I'd choose to… Ok, nevermind, I didn't think that sentence through."

Despite himself, Hydraulic laughed. He strode over to the portable sensor pack Slow Poke was operating. "Mind if I take a look?" he asked his yellow/green friend.

"Sure, why would I mind? Just because you don't trust me to do my damn job, not the kind of thing that would upset me."

Hydraulic rolled his optics and took a look. At first it looked like interference, but as he drilled down, he saw what the rearguard observers had radioed in. There was indeed something moving out there… a *lot* of somethings. It was as if the whole landscape was on the march. He tried to imagine the sheer scale of the numbers and failed. It must be hundreds of thousand of mechs, enough to dwarf the 56th and the Tol-Tech ten times over. "I hope this is that secret weapon the Assembly has been promising, because if it's

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not, we're all gonna look like my great uncle Trailcutter… after the Decepticons got through with him!"

Sky-Dive cursed himself for his failure. His army, the Tol-Tech, some 15,000 strong, had outnumbered the 56th three to two. That should have been enough, but it wasn't, and now his forces were spreading out all over the Dysprosium Plateau, getting hunted down by Hydraulic's squads. He knew he needed to fall back, regroup, make a stand, but geography offered him few choices. Ibex and Median were too obvious, so he'd ordered his troops to make for the Toxic Sludge Swamps. With luck, they could lose the pursuing Micromaster patrols in the depth of the muck without taking too many further casualties. Distant Hyperious was his rendezvous point; perhaps Shokaract could be convinced to take them in. But it would take many solar cycles for the slowest of his troops, those without a swift alt-mode, to travel. Sky-Dive's magnificent quetzalcoatl form could, of course, make it in just a few megacycles. But he instead chose to remain behind with his stragglers, trying to shepherd as many as he could to relative safety.

The silver lining was that most of the 56th patrols seemed to have pulled back. For the first couple of megacycles after their defeat, Hydraulic had been relentless. Sky-Dive couldn't blame him, he'd have made the same decision in the Micromaster's stabilizing servos. The reprieve was welcome, but puzzling.

And then he didn't have to wonder any more. There came an odd sound, faint at first but rapidly gaining in volume; it was like a cyberquake crossed with a meteor strike, and indeed there were minute tremors in the ground. It came from the north, and it was like nothing Sky-Dive had ever heard before. Against his better judgment, he flew to discern what the cause was. Normally, as commander, he'd have dispatched a recon squad, but he was the only flier in the small band of survivors heading to the rendezvous point.

As he approached, he saw what looked like an enormous megapede, winding and wending its way northeast, on a vector that would take it through the heart of the Rad Zone if it continued unabated. As he closed, he realized what he'd subconsciously known all along… this was no one creature, nothing in the universe could be that large. No, this was thousands, tens of thousands, *hundreds* of thousands, of individuals, moving together as one entity. These were the Vehicons he'd been warned of.

Just as with his own forces, the slowest elements set the pace of the overall army. In this case, it was the tank drones. Cycle drones in their monowheel configuration flanked the tanks, and aero drones hovered above in their semi-humanoid state.

Sky-Dive felt himself scanned by a thousand targeting beams and realized that his curiosity—or sense of duty, if he was being charitable to himself—was about to get him

killed. However, incredibly, the Vehicons paid him no heed, instead continuing their relentless march. He watched them, spellbound, for over a megacycle. The great megapede now stretched from horizon to horizon.

There was nothing, Sky-Dive realized, that could stand against such a unified force of purpose. Nothing. His world shattered, he flew back to his scattered troops. He vowed not to tell them of what he saw, to instead let them lead what was left of their lives with some glimmer of hope.

The Vehicons, for their part, continued their endless march, a march that would take them around the sonic canyon spur to their north, through the Rad Zone, and, eventually, to Iacon.

V Plus 2.96 Solar Cycles
Trannis Fork River, Iacon

Two-and-a-half megacycles into their march along the banks of the Trannis Fork, the troops were getting restless. Iacon had loomed large in their minds for years; the seat of Builder power, industry, and authority, any soldier who had given the matter any thought knew that the road to victory ran through Iacon.

And yet, they'd been marching through the streets of their greatest enemies for megacycles and seen barely any action. A few Maximals and Predacons did indeed greet them as liberators; they were told to remain in their homes. The Army of the Resistance didn't have time to sort through them, separate out potential recruits from saboteurs, and in any event untrained amateurs would cause more harm than good. There was the occasional fly-by, a few scattered landmines, some potshots from Builders with more courage than sense, and one memorable instance of a remote-controlled autocannon popping up in their midst. No large-scale organized action though. The rank-and-file didn't like it.

Command's reaction was more… nuanced. Inside the 8-wheeled camouflaged carrier that had once been a Decepticon named Reckage, they debated. "Is not something I trust," Psycho-Orb continued. "The Hot Rod, he has an army. This we know. We think small army, this we do not know for certain. But is enough to make our lives unhappy. So where is he?"

There were shrugs all around. Lio Convoy turned to Direwolf. "Best guess on the size of Hot Rod's forces?"

The hulking white Predacon growled. It had taken Lio Convoy a while to not take the gesture personally; it was merely his way. "The remains of the 17th came crawling back this way two orbital cycles ago. That's 3,000, and they haven't been redeployed. They have also conscripted all non-essential Cyberdroids, that's perhaps 5,000, though our PSP contacts suggest that only half have been trained. Assuming they throw everything including Sinkor at us, and—"

"Sinkor?" asked Blackarachnia.

"He turns into the kitchen sink." There were groans all around. "If they're turning out every recharge slab and emptying the hospitals of everyone who can walk, maybe 25,000. Tops. If there's anyone left in Assembly with a sense of realism, we're looking at less than 20."

B'Boom pounded his fists together enthusiastically. "Maybe they're just scared to face us! We've got four times that number!"

Lio Convoy shook his head. "Hot Rod is many things, but scared isn't one of them. If I were them, knowing what I do about the disposition of the Vehicons, I'd be fighting a rearguard action."

"Not me," Blackarachnia scratched out. "I'd split up my forces, hide them among the civilians and make the enemy demolish every building from here to the Pavilion."

"That's it," Lio Convoy said, and pointed his finger at her for emphasis. He was certain she'd stumbled onto something. "That's the optimal strategy. And someone over there would have seen it. Which means…"

"Yeah, boss," B'Boom began eagerly. "It means Hot Rod *chose* not to do it! Probably because, y'know…"

"I do know," agreed Lio Convoy. "Generals, I do believe that their top military commander has declared Iacon a de facto open city. This changes things. Inform the troops; we double time it to the Pavilion. I think Hot Rod is hoping that we force a surrender. With his army still in the field, the terms will be far more generous than if we have to break it to get where we're going."

"Not to mention all the lives saved, dude," added B'Boom.

Lio Convoy just nodded. Hot Rod had been directing Micromaster resources against him for years. This did indeed feel like the actions of the former Autobot leader. He wished all of his opponents had the same moral backstrut that Hot Rod consistently evidenced. Maybe then, he wouldn't have had to make so many compromises himself. "He's the best of them," he spoke, his volume low but clear. "Too bad he didn't serve a better cause."
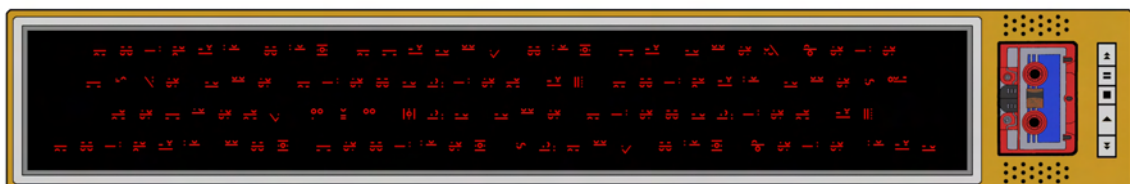
Longtooth obsessively scanned the warrens of Gilbax, looking for any sign of disloyalty among his Maximal populace. Though ICS assured the populace that everything was well under control, the chatter he was picking up from RFC and VoM made him think otherwise. He'd been around long enough to be able to feel deep in his shock absorbers when change was in the atmosphere. The Resistance boasts about breakthroughs in Vos and Yuss and nearby Tesarus were probably true, as were the Maximal gains in Plurex. But the urgency—no, the desperation—he heard in those broadcasts, combined with the ICS propaganda about the unstoppable army to the south made him think that there was something to all the Vehicon chatter from the past few solar cycles.

At first, the influx was subtle. There were more Maximals headed his way from the outskirts of town, the hovels at the edge of the Rad Zone, than normal commerce or work could explain. That trickle became a deluge, which became a flood. Over the space of only a few megacycles, Longtooth realized he was looking at a full scale exodus. He extended his senses to the outskirts of his domain but they were cut off, jammed by some unknown phenomenon. His ireful voice rang out, demanding that the populace tell him what exactly they were running from, but none paid him heed. This enraged him, and he tasked his few Cyberdroid—Cyberdroid!—enforcers with grabbing one of the fleeing mechs and interrogating him.

The first three they grabbed offered no explanation. They had seen the mass of fleeing Maximals and decided to follow the pack. Pathetic. The fourth, an avianoid with an injured wing, reported seeing a vast army of tanks and jets approaching. Not Resistance; something new.

And then, Longtooth saw it with his own optics. The endless columns of tanks, with their legless attendants rolling and hovering along. It looked like death. The column was half a hic wide and marching through the main thoroughfare of the town, spilling over into access roads and commercial boulevards. Any structures in the way were demolished with sheer mechanical precision—and mechanical indifference. One hapless Maximal, a mendicant who had lost his legs some stellar cycles back, was caught in their march. The pickets, the monowheeled purple Vehicons, picked him up and effortlessly converted him into one of them. But those who got out of the way, which was the overwhelming majority of the populace, were ignored. It was the indifference of an angry god, striding arrogantly where it will, crushing those who happened to be underfeet.

Maximals huddled under his watchful eye, congregating around him. He had always inspired revulsion in those he oversaw, but now they looked to him for whatever scant protection he could offer. His Cyberdroid attendants, too, looked to him for leadership, asked if they should oppose this new alien intrusion to their municipality. Longtooth ordered them to stand down. There was nothing in Gilbax that could hope to stand up to such a force, not in a million stellar cycles.

A megacycle later, the last of them rolled out of Gilbax, and into the outskirts of Iacon. Whatever horror the Assembly had wrought was on its way back to them.

*V Plus 3.33 Solar Cycles*
The High Pavilion, Iacon

The Builder Assembly was in a state of sheer panic. Lio Convoy's army had marched, uncontested, through the streets of Iacon and was now less than half a megacycle outside of their very own position. With him were nearly eighty thousand troops. A second Resistance army had marched from Tesarus, though those were engaged with the 42nd at present. The Maximal Nation had occupied most of Plurex, and the Predacons had seized Proximax.

Their own forces consisted of three bodies. The Pavilion Guard consisted of elite troopers, to be sure, but with only 400 members could hardly be expected to stop an army. There was the Iacon Police Force, recently formed in response to the MCSF's defection, but they had only a few thousand security bots, many of them formerly of private security firms, the rest recent conscripts. Worse, they were trained as law enforcement, not soldiers. Finally there was whatever Hot Rod had managed to scrap together into the newly formed 001st Micromaster Division. They only knew what it was called because Rook had mentioned it on an ICS broadcast; Hot Rod still wasn't answering their hails. Eventually Assemblybot Riker had volunteered to go to Hot Rod and hear his report in person. After his earlier insubordination, it was an open question whether the 001st had any intention of actually engaging with any of the forces marching on Iacon.

Well, thought Knock-Out, *there was another player on the board, wasn't there? Those Vehicons should be getting here any nanoklik.* At least, so sayeth Galva Convoy, whom Ratbat was busy haranguing. Given the unclear relationship between Galva Convoy and the proto-race he'd spawned, Knock-Out wondered if that was the wisest course of action. The strange little Maximal was assuring Ratbat—again—that the Vehicons would be arriving any cycle now, and advising patience.

Maddeningly, there were still no visuals, but now ICS was reporting that multiple confirmed reports of Vehicons coming from 92^0 south, a vast army that would spell Iacon's salvation from the barbarians at her gate. Still, Knock-Out would feel an awful lot better if he could see these so-called saviors with his own optics. True, he'd always intended to authorize the vote—no matter his little tap-dance to wring a few concessions out of the boors—but now that the moment was arriving, he was starting to worry that so many armies converging in downtown Iacon was going to get... messy. Ah, well. In chaos

there was opportunity. Whomever wound up running Cybertron, Knock-Out was certain that a bot of his talents and resources would be welcome.
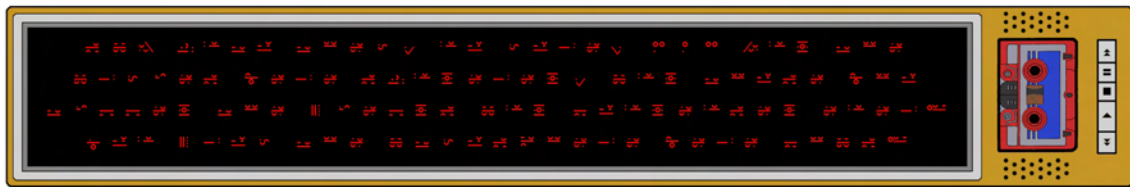
"Scouts report the 001st is encamped at the High Pavilion Arena," reported Grimwing. His grep-avianoid pet, Blackbeak, was perched on his arm, twisting her head this way and that, taking in the excitement of an army about to embark on the final battle of a stellar cycles-long campaign. "Despite their proximity to our position, there is no special tactical significance to this location. Though they have put defensive measures in place, they show no indication that they intend to engage us. I have no doubt that they *could*, should they decide, and their soldiers are arrayed in position to roll out at a moment's notice. But they currently *aren't*."

"Excellent news, Grimwing. Did your scouts encounter resistance?" Lio Convoy inquired.

"Minor resistance, Supreme Commander. A Builder hardwired into one of the spires shot down Brim-Stone. He was retrieved by S&R and should be back in the fight in a solar cycle or two. Blackbeak here taught that Builder the error of his ways." The mechanimal cocked her head, then gave a shrill whistle.

"And the Vehicons?" asked Blackarachnia.

Grimwing looked even more serious than usual. "Close. It's difficult to get in visual range, their air support is ludicrously heavy, but based on the strength of their jamming field and maximum-altitude surveillance, they're less than two megacycles out at their current speed. Now, with all that said, if they choose to leave the tanks behind, the fliers are effectively here *now*."

"Hmmm… that's odd. It gives us more time than our best-case scenario suggested," noted Direwolf. "Why?"

"My guess, because they haven't been coming straight here," offered Grimwing brusquely. "It seems they're splitting their forces, deploying some kind of hubs or nodes at various points through the city. It gives us extra time while they get in place, but once they strike they'll be hitting us from all angles. We'll be effectively surrounded."

Lio Convoy considered all of that. "So the extra time is a mixed blessing. And with The Pack bogged down by the 42nd and the Maximal and Predacon armies still fighting in the border states, we cannot count on reinforcements. We're it.

"Generals, we're only going to get one shot at this. Spread the word to all combatants. We occupy the High Pavilion and capture the Builder Assembly alive. Once this is

accomplished, we force them to call off their attack dogs, or figure out how they're being controlled and do it ourselves. And then... then the war is over." He turned to Direwolf. "How soon can we attack?"

"The troops are ready now," he replied. "We just need... say 5 cycles to distribute the specifics."

"Congratulations. We are on the cusp of victory." Lio Convoy paused. "Let's try not to frag it up."

Revolution was in the air. Dante was reminded of his time back on Rebirth, when the Decepticons had first arrived. It was a time of sweeping changes, of mighty armies clashing. Those times had come to Cybertron again.

This time, though, he wasn't the one calling the shots. He shifted his rifle awkwardly from his left hand to his right. He would have thought that, as the head of one of the Decepticons' few cityformers, he would have been afforded more respect. He supposed the fact that he had been summarily replaced with an organic back at the twilight of the Great War might have something to do with his lowly status. He'd gone through a series of odd jobs, tried managing an import/export business, and eventually settled into the deadly world of vollyblast. He was ambivalent about that; it galled him to be forced to perform for the amusement of others, but he loved the opportunity to vanquish his opponents on the stylized court that was part combat simulator, part sport.

And then the beasts came, and the Maximals went rogue, and suddenly the Resistance didn't seem so pathetic anymore. When the call went out to all able-bodied Cyberdroids who weren't in Class C or higher positions or otherwise deemed essential to Cybertron's ever-shrinking economic output. And so he was once again pressed into service, as a lowly sentry in the Iacon Police Force. Which was why he was stuck guarding a minor access tunnel under the High Pavilion' southwest face. It wasn't even his on day, but his immediate superior had hey-you-d him due to all the turmoil and stuck him in this tunnel. His shift was due to end two megacycles earlier, but there was no relief in sight. This was doubtless due to the massive Resistance army whose fliers were even now dominating the skies of Iacon. He supposed it was a good thing that the Pavilion was a prize that Lio Convoy would surely want taken intact. Still, he hoped his relief got there soon.

As if on cue, a navy blue Micromaster twin-laser tank rolled up and converted to humanoid form. It took a nanoklik, but then Dante recognized who it was.

"Caliburn? Caliburn, it is you! It's been ages." He hit the larger bot in the arm, a friendly gesture but one designed to demonstrate dominance. After all, Dante had been the senior partner, back when they had both been binary bonded to Zarak.

Caliburn, for his part, looked Dante up and down. "You haven't changed," he grunted.

Dante shrugged. "I suppose not. Not like you. You're a Micromaster now?"

It was Caliburn's turn to shrug. "I was one of the first. After MegaZarak was destroyed, back in the day, I fell in with Thunderwing's crowd. He was looking for volunteers for a new upgrade. This—" he gestured over his whole body, pausing fractionally at the wheels, "—was it."

"Beats being an engine, I'll bet," Dante observed. "So, hey, you're my relief? I could use a recharge."

The Micromaster just laughed. "Recharge? Friend, the Resistance is here, now, and the Vehicons aren't far behind. You're stuck with me here for the duration."

Dante swore. "You know, it's supposed to be my off day." Caliburn said nothing, just rolled his optics.

The cycles ticked by, in uncomfortable silence. Dante attempted to engage his bulky associate, get him reminiscing about the glory days with Zarak, but was rebuffed. Finally, Dante could take it no longer. "Look, did I pour $C_{12}H_{22}O_{11}$ in your gas tank or something?"

Caliburn took his optics off the tunnel they were supposed to be guarding for the first time. "You, man. You're pathetic. It's been, what, 3 centuries? And you're still the same old Dante. Weasely. Complaining. Nothing's your fault. No wonder Zarak dumped your skidplate for Borx's grandkid."

Dante started to say something, but the words died in his throat. The silence stretched out for almost a cycle. Finally, he found a response. "I deserved to be his head. When *I* was bonded to him we beat Fortress Maximus."

"Oh, right," sneered Caliburn. "Like that was all you. You always were a *big mech* when you were nestled between his head-pincers."

Before he could stop himself, Dante had swing the butt of his rifle at Caliburn's head. The Micromaster barely managed to duck under it. "Big mistake, little mech," he declared, and shifted back to his tank mode. Instincts kicked in, and Dante found himself with his gun pointed at the tank, and both of Caliburn's teal lasers pointed at him.

Then something strange happened. A small sphere came rolling down the corridor. It took him a nanoklik, but then it registered what it was. "Grenade!" he yelled, and dove for cover. Caliburn attempted to shift back to humanoid form, and was caught mid-transformation by the blast. It blew him back against the wall, where he fell in a mismatched heap.

For his part, Dante was merely dazed. He attempted to recover, to get back to his feet, only to see a dozen Maximals and Predacons with weapons pointed at him. Too late, he realized that he was still carrying his rifle. Before he could discard it, weapons fire shredded him, and he felt vitals evaporate into clouds of superheated dust. As he lay, curled in a ball, his last words slipped out involuntarily. "I'm not even supposed to be here today."

The Resistance Army encircled the High Pavilion. It was unknown exactly how the Vehicons were controlled, so Lio Convoy had ordered no shelling. No, the structure would need to be stormed and occupied. Surrounding buildings were quickly commandeered; any who offered resistance were summarily dealt with. Fliers continued to monitor both the state of the small—but still potent—Micromaster 001st, and the advance of the Vehicon horde, whose arrival could now be measured in tens of cycles. They had cut things close indeed.

His advanced troops approached any and all entrances, and then attempted to breach simultaneously. The Iacon Police Force—those who hadn't cut and run—interposed themselves, but to no avail. Soon two of the Resistance brigades—Psycho-Orb's Angry Asteroids and B'Boom's Mighty Comets—were marching through the Pavilion itself, with only the Temple Guard to stop them.
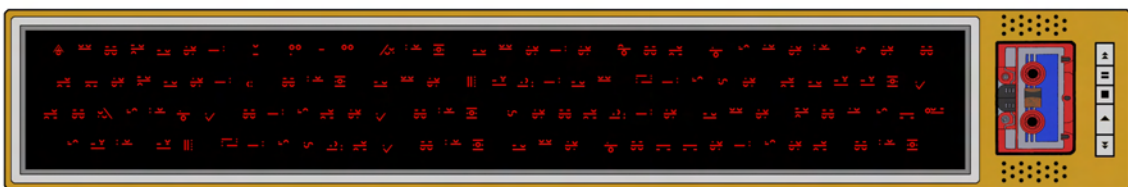
Flak knew the High Pavilion like the back of his manipulator casing. He also knew that it was designed for debate and aesthetics, not for holding off an army. Oh, to be sure, they'd installed numerous security devices, but those had largely been designed to deal with terror attacks and lone crazies, not a full-scale invasion.

Still, he'd do his duty, as would those guards under his command. The huge, airy narthex was a lost cause. He'd planted explosives and detonated them once the first few hundred proto-formers rushed in. It was a shame for so much artwork to be destroyed, but such was war.

The upper levels would be difficult to defend, but fortunately there was little of strategic value. He'd sent Powerbomb and Dropshot, the brothers in blue, to the transmitters, to ambush the inevitable Resistance sortie in that direction. The rest of his forces he split up and sent to the tunnels under the Pavilion. The Assembly had relocated themselves from the spacious Assembly Chamber to the bunkers down below. That way he could make each of his account for ten of theirs. Unfortunately, they outnumbered him not ten to one, but *two hundred* to one.

"Scrap it," he said, startling Skat-or, his translucent commander of the miniscule Temple airforce—grounded, naturally, in the face of the overwhelming air superiority of the Resistance army—and his number two bot. "We've got everything deployed, so there's no point in me being here. I'm going to go die with my mechs. Skat-or started to object, but Flak silenced him with his open palm. "You can monitor our deaths and report them back to the Assembly just as well as I can. Better, even, because your supersonic transport mode ain't much use down here. Me," he said, and shifted to his missile-tank configuration, "I can cause some damage!"
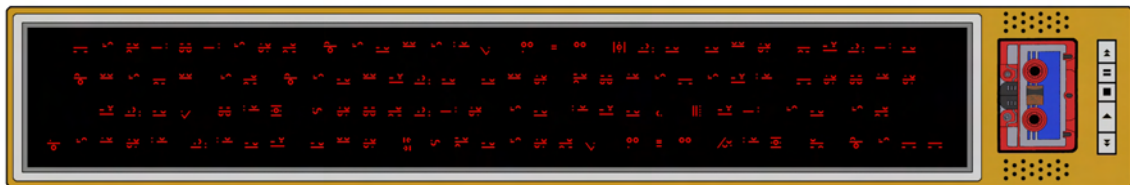
Psycho-Orb continued to wend his way through the tunnels, his best squad in tow. His armodrillo form was built for this, and he relished it. The truth was, when he joined the Resistance, he'd never expected Lio Convoy to do as well as he had. He'd deposed of Icepick because the opportunity presented itself, and the vainglorious fool had had it coming. And now, here he was, fighting through the tunnels of the High Pavilion itself, the hated Assembly huddling up somewhere beneath his four clacking feet. Just yesterday he'd been making his way through Fort Wenx, with the same set of troopers.

Well… not the same. They'd suffered 40% casualties in that assault. So far they'd been luck. His various squad commanders had reported that they'd only lost a few hundred of the thousands of mechs storming the Pavilion, but that was sure to change. Part of him wanted to rotate in an entirely new crew, give those mechs who had stormed the Maxilla a well-deserved rest. But with the Vehicons in outer Iacon and closing fast, he needed his best mechs with him every step of the way.

They came to a sharp bend where the corridor narrowed precipitously. Every circuit in Psycho-Orb's body screamed ambush. "Snarl-blast, is dangerous geometry, no?" he whispered. The orange femme gave a throaty growl and converted from her striped cybercat form. A pulse grenade appeared in her hand and she crept forward. Psycho-Orb approved of the strategy; if there was anyone waiting around the bend, there was a good chance the explosion would flush them out.

His paranormal senses tingled, warning him of imminent danger. "Wait," he cried, and Snarl-blast froze. He looked about, trying to catch a glimpse of where the threat was coming from. Then he spied the vents in the ceiling. "Back, back, they are using the gas!" His rearmost units turned to withdraw, but a pair of small autocannons popped up from a hidden chamber in the floor. By this point the faint hiss of the gas had reached his audio sensors. "Forward, is our only chance!" he shouted. He could see the faint but distinct electric purple of zirconium gas, and knew their time to act was measured in nanokliks. Indeed, several of his troops nearest to the billowing purple clouds, Snarl-blast among them, fell twitching in spasmodic piles as they expired. He rushed forward, around the narrow bend, which had several twists and abrupt steps and drops, and came face to face with two Micromaster tanks. The double barreled tan one opened fire and scored two hits, dropping Psycho-Orb to the ground.

He lay there, helpless, watching and listening as the two Micromasters—Sidetrack and Bombshock, they called themselves—decimated his men as they desperately fled the gas.

Nyet, he thought to himself. It doesn't end like this. He tried to summon his subspace weapons cache, but he was too weak. Dying, probably. Then he remembered the pulse grenade that had been in Snarl-blast's hands. He extended his paranormal senses and located it, just around the bend. He willed it to roll forward, and it did so, navigating the tricky ambush point and coming to rest between the green and tan tanks who were destroying his mechs one-by-one as they trickled out of the deadly blind.

"Go fragment yourselves," he choked out, and willed the grenade to activate. When the rest of the haggard survivors of the Angry Asteroids' lead squad stumbled through, there was nothing but burnt-out corpses to greet them.

Bits and pieces of the durasteel ceiling came crumbling down, landing on Knock-Out's exo-walker. He had tried listening to the reports from the Temple Guard, but after the eighth or twelfth report of a valiant last stand, wherein three of theirs traded their lives for thirty of the enemy before expiring, it all started to blend together. Even the high drama of life and death and noble sacrifice became tedious after too much repetition.

Also, he was starting to get sick of his fourteen—Riker had never returned—noble peers. Some were, naturally, fairly annoying to begin with. Mindgame wasn't half as clever as she thought she was, for instance; Octus a glutton; Tomaandi an idiot; and Halogen was old enough to make Alpha Trion look like a protoform. But even those he normally counted as allies were, in this time of stress, showing their worst faces. The usually sharp Contrail had taken to glowering silently at everyone, snapping at any foolish enough to come into his orbit; Cross-Cut was so nervous he was backfiring when he thought no one was paying attention; and Sherma was quietly drinking himself into a stupor.

A green and yellow tankish Micromaster burst into the chambers. "Assemblybots," he said, respectful but in the tone of a bot accustomed to command, "we've done our best, but they are only cycles away. My remaining troops are outside your bunker. We will fight to the end to keep them out, but realistically there's only one way this can end, and it's not with victory. I would… prepare yourselves."

Ratbat started to screech something at him, but he merely saluted and crisply about-faced. The door closed behind him. "Get me Galva Convoy!" shouted the purple Recordicon.

One of the Micromaster techs started trying to get the Maximal back on the line. The comms had been spotty since before the assault began, probably a result of the Vehicon jamming field, and then their own troops had blown the transmitters when the Resistance tried to occupy them. They were down to the hardlines, at least until someone decided to cut them.

The hologram of the black and purple proto-former appeared on the screen, though Knock-Out's keen eye for design noticed a change. Where once there had been a Maximal symbol on his chest, now there was a new design, a two-tone symbol that called to mind the old Terran symbol for radiation. It was more… geometric than Cybertronian symbols tended to be, though still managed to look ever-so-vaguely like a face. Not the face of an ordinary mech, though, no. This was the unhinged face of one of the new Vehicons. *Not portentous at all,* thought Knock-Out.

Ratbat started to rant, but Galva Convoy cut him off. "I am quite busy, you know, directing my Vehicons into place."

"The Resistance is literally OUTSIDE OUR DOOR! Stop playing toy soldiers and order them into the Pavilion!"

The stare Galva Convoy gave Ratbat could have stopped a missile in its place. Then it softened. "Of course, my lord. Immediately. They'll be there in… 3.7 cycles. Might I suggest you initiate the Drosera procedure? You'll want to see this with your own optics."

The fifteen frazzled councilors looked to each other. Finally Ratbat spoke. "I… I move that we set the bunker for Drosera."

The motion carried, 8-7. Knock-Out voted to do it. After all, why in the Pit not?

Flak looked to the eight survivors of the 400 body-strong Temple Guard. He couldn't have been prouder of any of them. He estimated that the 392 lives lost had cost the Resistance thousand in return, a kill ratio for the history vids. Unfortunately, they'd run out of cul-de-sacs, blind turns, poisonous gas points, and autogun ambushes. No, the last eight would just have to make do with a little cover and a lot of luck. Position favored them, at least, for the Resistance had to come out corridors 70 mechanometers away with little cover. It was the last little bit of advantageous geography in the catacombs of the High Pavilion, and Flak intended to wring every drop of advantage he could from it.

The first of the Resistance scouts fell to Gunlift. It didn't take long for his fellows to follow, attempting to overwhelm the few paltry defenders left. Tracer was the first of the eight to fall. He felt bad that this was her last stand; were she in the open, her Apache configuration would have been far more effective. Then Cloud Raker went down, and then Big Shot, and then Cannon, and suddenly they were down by almost half. Thunder was the next to go, and then Gunlift.

It was down just him, Heavy-Tread, and Steel Wind. A rumble came from behind him, and Flak wracked his processor to figure out what was happening. Then it hit him: Drosera. They were going to raise the bunker to the surface for some incomprehensible reason. They'd need another cycle, maybe, before the bunker became inaccessible from the catacombs. Flak did a quick diagnostic and found himself down to his last 10% of reserves. "I don't fancy dying on the defensive. Heavy-Tread, you up for a charge?"

The red M1 Abrams tank chortled out a "Hells to the yes!"

"Steel Wind," Flak ordered, "cover us as we go, then duck back into the chambers. Who knows, the Assemblybots may have use of someone who can actually, you know, walk." That last elicited a chuckle.

"Roger that, sir. It's been an honor," snapped off the jet, and then he braced himself.

"The honor is all mine," Flak said, and meant it. "Let's go!"

The Resistance was not expecting a charge, partially because it was suicidal. But the maneuver was so dumb it had wrapped past moronic and around to genius. The Resistance hadn't bothered to set up defensive lines and the two tanks crashed through their first few fighters, firing all the way. It didn't take the Resistance troops long to rally, of course, and when they did the two tanks were surrounded and outnumbered a hundred to one. Nonetheless, in death, Flak accomplished his objective; by the time the B'Boom managed to reform his team into a coherent squad, the Builder Assembly bunker had already started its slow ascent to the surface.

"Still no word from Psycho-Orb," reported Survive, "but elements of the Angry Asteroids have linked up with B'Boom, shoring up his own losses. Casualties are north of 50%. It's a slaughterhouse in there."

"Still no luck acquiring communications?" asked Lio Convoy.

"No sir, Supreme Commander. We're relying on runners until we can get hardlines in place." Survive didn't look pleased by this. Neither was Lio Convoy, but he wouldn't let it show.

"Vehicons!" The shout came from the rear of the lines, where his troops had been frantically assembling their portable fortifications and otherwise preparing the landscape as favorably as they could. Lio Convoy could see the huge numbers of drones crashing into his troops like waves on the shore of the Great Rust Sea. They'd been expecting this, of course, and weren't exactly caught by surprise. But at some point the cycle and aero drones had abandoned their slower tank companions to begin the assault just a few cycles earlier than expected, giving the defenders something of a shock.

Lio Convoy was glad to see his troops offering an excellent accounting of themselves. Their fields of fire interlocked, their energy shields were expertly tuned, and their cover was more than adequate. Thousands of Vehicons perished in the first few cycles. But Lio Convoy had reviewed as many of the dispatches as had been received from their fallen territory; he knew that the ease of this battle was an illusion. His soldiers would tire, run out of energon and ammunition; the Vehicons would not. Or, rather, they had enough reinforcements that it hardly mattered. That his forces would likely find themselves surrounded only exacerbated the problem.

No, the objective remained the Assembly, a forced surrender. If only B'Boom and Psycho-Orb could accomplished it.

And then, the screech of tearing metal behind him drew his attention. The ruined façade of the High Pavilion above-ground structures split down the middle and pulled apart, unfolding from the inside out like a the flowers of a twistvine. The wail grew louder and louder, dwarfing even the multitudinous explosions of the Vehicons impacting on his army's fortifications, and a mighty durasteel structure rose from the ground. *The fabled Assembly bunker*, he realized. That could only mean one thing… B'Boom and Psych-Orb had done it! Why else would the Assembly expose themselves thusly?

But circumstances would make mockery of his judgement. The bunker continued to rise into the sky, upthrust proudly until it was a conspicuous disk atop a mammoth hydraulic spire. It reached its apex with a shudder, locking into place with an echoing clack. Only

then did the walls and ceiling unfurl, revealing fifteen of the sixteen Builders of the Assembly. A small number of Micromasters scurried about in attendance.

It was an amazing display of arrogance, and Lio Convoy would make them pay. "Grimwing, fliers to that platform, now. And, if you would—" he gestured to himself.

"Not without me you don't," quipped Blackarachnia as she sidled up next to him. Grimwing nodded, barked off a few orders to the nearest fliers in his brigade, the Flying Meteors, and they took to the sky. 53 of them in all landed on the platform, a full platoon of fliers plus Grimwing and his two passengers.

One tall silver Micromaster attempted to impose himself between Lio Convoy and the council, but was smart enough not to open fire. "Son, you don't want to throw your life away so recklessly, do you?" Lio Convoy asked. The Micromaster thought it over, glanced over his shoulder, and then stepped aside. Lio Convoy noticed that his integrated weapon were not powered off, but neither were they pointed in his direction.

With the lone guard out of the way, Lio Convoy finally lay his optics on the Builder Assembly. Fifteen pathetic Builders, all but Ratbat helpless without a walker. One was missing, but Lio Convoy filed that away as unimportant. His understanding was that a quorum was 12, so he had more than enough.

"Members of the Assembly, I am here as representative of the Resistance to personally accept your surrender," he declared gravely, and gave the Solipsistic Sword a *doink* on the ground for emphasis. Naturally, the sword's ability to dampen any signal was deactivated; this was a moment he wanted preserved for posterity.

He wasn't exactly sure what reaction he was expecting, but it certainly wasn't the one he got. Ratbat, the most hawkish of the council, had the audacity to laugh. "Oh ho, Lio Convoy, that's rich. You're in no position to make demands, not with your forces about to be digested by the Vehicons."

It was a surprising amount of backstrut, and Lio Convoy didn't have any time for it. He drew back his weapon and severed Ratbat's arm, which had been pointed at him in a manner most disrespectful.

"I'm sorry, Assemblybot, I think perhaps you… misunderstand your position," purred Blackarachnia. She waved her mandible blaster vaguely at the rest of the assembly, a drop of cyber venom flying out of the barrel and landing on the face of one of the members. He wiped it off surreptitiously. "We only need 12 of you to move a vote," she continued, "which means I get to string three of you from this structure and let your bodies dance for the amusement of our troops below." Lio Convoy arranged his face in a mask of mild opprobrium. They'd honed their good-cop/bad-cop routine to an art over the stellar cycles.

But once again events took an unexpected turn. "Well," squealed one of the other Assemblybots, a handsome red Decepticon sportscar, "what are you waiting for?" It took Lio Convoy a moment to realize that the Decepticon was not addressing him, but a small

holodisk he was holding. When the Resistance supreme commander focused on it, he was astounded to see… himself! A version of himself, anyway. This copy was in his old body, and had an unfamiliar symbol on his chest. He was resplendent in black, lavender, and pink, and yet to look at him set Lio Convoy's circuits on edge. Deep in his spark, he knew that this was an abomination.

"Wait no longer," came the hologram's measured, confident tones, so like Lio Convoy's own. "The moment has arrived." Then the hologram darkened its optics and nodded its head. Almost immediately there was a change in the tenor of the battle raging at the periphery of their senses. Lio Convoy's sharp tactical sense realized almost immediately that the Vehicons had stopped firing at his mechs. Then aero drones, hundreds of them, shot into the sky, flying far above the battlefield, well into the planet's troposphere, only to reverse course and begin a meteoric plummet down to the raised dais he was standing on.

Grimwing ordered his troops into the air, and assorted dragons, avianoids, hippogriffs, bolt-bats, jurassanoids, griffons, pegasi, and even a phoenix—complete with flaming wings—took to the air. The Vehicons didn't so much engage his troops as ignore them, continuing their ballistic trajectory heedless of opposition. Half of the platoon was obliterated when the aero drones collided with them at speed. Most of the rest were scattered. Grimwing and several others attempted to redirect their momentum to get back to the platform, but they were trailing the dozens of Vehicons who landed on the dais and spread out. Lio Convoy and Blackarachnia were now outnumbered by 25 to 1.

"Well well well," gloated Ratbat, who was attempting keep the circuits of his right arm from spilling out of the wound with middling success. "Looks like Lio Convoy is about to become a Vehicon. What do you think, Galva Convoy, would he look better as a tank or a motorcycle?"

The hologram was cutting in and out due to the jamming field, but the homunculus the red sportscar was clutching—Galva Convoy evidently, an ominous name if ever there was one—gave a wry chuckle. "My mentor and I—" mentor, wondered Lio Convoy, but other concerns soon distracted him, "—were wondering the same thing… about you!"

With that, the aero drones turned on the Assemblybots as one and sank their clawed hands into their chests. The shocked council gave screams and yelps and groans and Lio Convoy witnessed the horror of the assimilation process with his own optics for the first time. Ratbat, as the first one struck, was the first one converted. His bulk, much larger than a Maximal or Predacon, would never be able to squeeze into one of the three body types they'd observed, and indeed it didn't; rather, he became a metallic grey hovering thing, perhaps twice the mass of the tank drones they'd seen. Twin red blades hung off of nacelles on his back, keeping it aloft despite the lack of proper feet. The other, larger council members were transmuted into hulking purple things with tiny heads; unlike most of the other Vehicons, these had two normally functioning legs, though the feet were disproportionate and circular, which, combined with the tiny head and slightly too-long arms, made for a disquieting silhouette. Each of these new class of Vehicons sported the same sinister symbol as had been worn by Galva Convoy.

The red mech holding the holodisk was the last Assemblybot standing, and he was groveling to the tiny simulacrum in his hand. "Wait, please, I've got all the Assembly's access codes, even ones that are supposed to be reserved for ranking members." The hologram said nothing, and two of the hulking purple drones advanced on him. "I'm too… *handsome* to die!" The purple claw thrust into his chest cavity said otherwise, and soon the Builder Assembly was no more.

By this point, Grimwing had rallied the remains of the platoon he'd brought with him and flying beasts rained from the sky, harassing the Builder-scale Vehicons. Though these were no smarter than their smaller brethren, they were certainly more powerful, and one by one his fliers were disabled or assimilated into the enemy.

"We need to skedaddle, pronto!" cried Blackarachnia, and Lio Convoy agreed. He looked over the edge of the dais, expecting to see his army locked in a life-or-death struggle with the Vehicons. That was certainly happening, but instead of a throng of Vehicon reserves, waiting to take the places of those on the front lines, those not engaged with his forces were spreading throughout Iacon and assimilating everything in their path. Maximals, Predacons, Autobots, Decepticons, Micromasters, Macromasters… none were safe! The proto-scale Vehicons were being reinforced by helicopters and, it seemed, six-wheeled heavy artillery models.

The math was inescapable. Iacon and its suburbs contained some three million Builders, few of them capable of offering the slightest resistance. His army was done for. They couldn't kill the Vehicons faster than they could replenish their ranks. There was no way out that he could see, nowhere that they could retreat to. He stared at the unfolding carnage, his mouthplate loose.

It was Blackarachnia that snapped him out of it, with a powerful slap across his face. "Wake up, Mufasa! It's time to blow this sparkplug!" He blinked, then nodded. Grimwing gathered them up and leapt off the platform, taking them back to street level and his army.

The silver Micromaster jet was flying in formation with them. "If it's all the same to you, boss, Imma follow your lead. Whatever future Cybertron has left, I think it lies solidly in your hands." Deep in his spark, Lio Convoy knew the Micromaster spoke true.

V Plus 3.51 Solar Cycles
ICS Broadcast Center, Iacon

Downtown Iacon was in shambles. Iacon Communications Services was located in the 200-story-tall Verity Tower, giving it an excellent view of the unfolding cataclysm.

"If you think I'll read these lines," rang out Rook's arrogant tones, "you're out of your Inferno-scorched Mortilus-loving processor!"

"And what, pray tell, is wrong with them?" asked Fever Dream. As the executive producer of the ICS network, it was his responsibility to make sure that the truth—the ideal truth that kept society functioning optimally—reached as wide an audience as possible. The instructions from the Assembly had been fragmentary at best, but now that they'd stopped all together, the responsibility devolved to Fever Dream. It was one that his dark tan shoulders were more than capable of bearing. He thought himself quite handsome, with his maroon body, legs, wings, and hands, and tan arms. True, he'd been hardwired into the Verity Tower for the past century-and-a-half, which rather made his status as a triple changer less impressive. Still, whatever his infirmity of body, he had a keen intellect and told amazing stories.

"What's wrong with it?" Rook asked. "What *isn't* wrong with it? The Resistance has *not* been routed, the Vehicons are *not* here to help, and the 001st is *not* valiantly defending the besieged High Pavilion."

Uppity. "And how do you come by this information?" asked Fever Dream, his tone haughty.

"By looking out the Gaea-hexed window!" his anchor shouted. The little grey-and-black Autobot was as small as a Builder could be while still being considered a Macromaster. As such, he could move about under his own power, albeit slowly. He was taking advantage of this ability—flaunting it, one might say—by pacing back and forth in an agitated way.

"Look, Rook, calm down," Fever Dream commanded. His anchor looked at him incredulously, and Fever Dream rolled his optics behind his orange visor. "I get that you're upset, but ICS is all about my vision. I understand that it may not align 100% with reality, but—"

"Not align 100% with reality?" Fever Dream decided he really didn't care for Rook's tone. The time might come to dump him and replace him with someone else. Circuit maybe, she was a real go-getter. "You've left reality in your rearview mirror stellar cycles ago. You've been living in your own fantasy world and peddling it as news for so long you can't even tell the difference. Look out the clutch-munching window, Fever Dream! Vehicons are running rampant through the streets! ICS has a responsibility to let people know to defend themselves!"

"I think that we might be in agree-to-disagree territory here," Fever Dream ventured. Yes,

it was definitely time to replace Rook. He supposed he could do the broadcast himself. He was certainly dapper enough. Perhaps get one of the Micromaster techs to temporarily disconnect him from the tower; his life support was so gauche.

"Agree to disagree?" ranted Rook. "Are you crazy? This is it, after today, I quit, I'm out. I've tried like the Pit to work with you, but you're a few microchips short of a motherboard. *Boss.*" He walked over to where Andromeda was rattling off statistics about Cybertron's economic output— Fever Dream had been particularly proud of those, they'd come to him during his recharge cycle and he just had to share them—and signaled that he wanted to break in. She gave a subtle half nod.

Totally unacceptable, thought Fever Dream. His whole staff was in disarray. It was definitely time for a little purge here at the office. It was a shame Builders never fought in the Games—and that the Games themselves had been on hiatus for the past few stellar cycles—or he'd give Rook a proper fate. As it was, he'd probably just get a fine for improper broadcasting.

"This is Rook here," he announced to the world, his producer Aston manning the camerabot. For some reason half the staff hadn't bothered to show up today, another dent in Fever Dream's bumper. This really just wasn't his day. "It is my sad duty to inform you that the Vehicons, who were purported to be the saviors of Iacon, may well be its downfall. They have turned on the Assembly and—"

That was enough to get Rook well and truly convicted, Fever Dream thought as he pulled the plug and shifted the feed to himself, inelegant wires and all. "This is Fever Dream, editor-in-chief here at the Iacon Communications Service. I'd like to apologize for my rogue reporter there, he's been under a great deal of stress."

There was an explosion, and eight of the large copter drones poured through the opening. Security would certainly have their hands full. Fever Dream just hoped it wasn't audible on the feed; he was going out live! "I'd like to assure you that the Vehicons are, indeed, fully under Assembly control." He watched as they spread out, pinning Rook and Aston and Photon and Andromeda to the wall and forcibly reformatting them. "Please afford them every courtesy." One of them was speeding his way. He hoped it would be considerate enough to stay out of frame. "I assure you, they are here to help," he said, as one of the copter drones plunged its long red fingers into his chest. After the new artillery drone rose from where Fever Drone had been seated, it smashed the camera, and a technical difficulties card automatically kicked into the broadcast. It continued to broadcast for another four megacycles, and then ICS went dark forever.
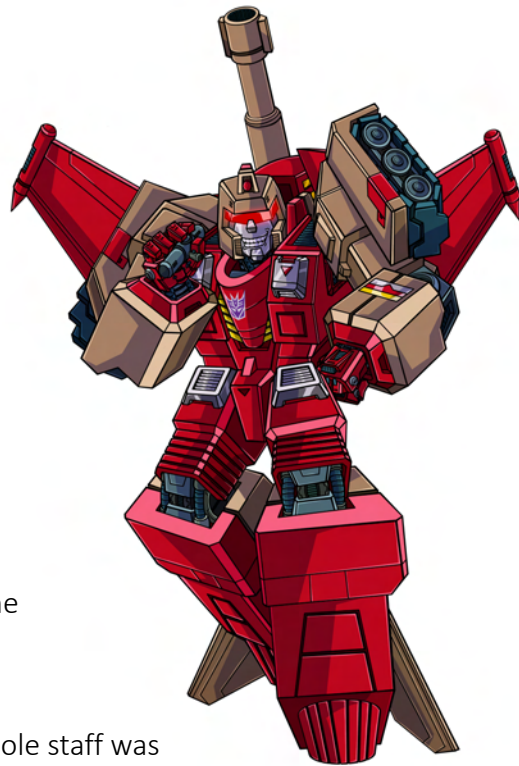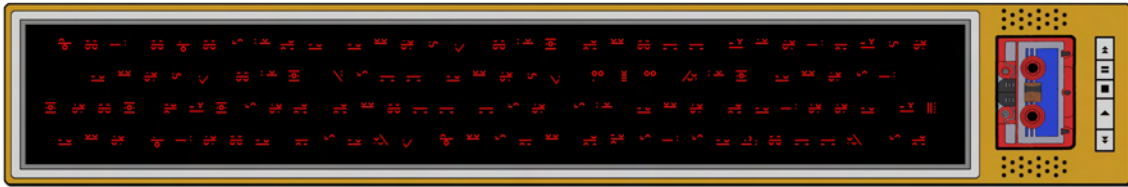
V Plus 3.72 Solar Cycles
High Pavilion Ruins, Iacon

Two megacycles into what would probably be their final battle, Lio Convoy's army was almost completely enervated. He couldn't blame them; he'd pushed them as hard as he dared, spending three days marching them to the heart of the enemy, only to find that they were making a last stand. Without a clear sense of how to win, the Army was merely fighting not to die, and that just wasn't enough. Lio Convoy's best, only idea, had been to capture the Assembly and bend it to his will, and that plan had been snatched from his grasp by his own doppelgänger.

And then a new plan started to coalesce, born of equal parts desperation and exhaustion. It wasn't simply the future of the proto-races that was at stake, but of every Cybertronian. Maybe even the galaxy; what horrors might a Cybertron completely unified under the Vehicon infection inflict on an unsuspecting galaxy? There might—might!—be a way to at least cauterize the wound. To amputate the gangrenous limb before it spread.

Though it was normally his way to bring important decisions before his Generals, in this instance he wouldn't burden them with it. Besides, B'Boom and Psycho-Orb still hadn't emerged from the catacombs, and Grimwing and his fliers were desperately keeping the aero and copter drones off of his land troops. Direwolf and Survive were the line with the troops and Cybershark had, presumably, perished with the small Resistance fleet when it had finally been overwhelmed. That left only...

"Blackarachnia, find me Ro-Tor."

Her optics widened. "I hope you know what you're doing, Panja," she said as she slipped away. As he contemplated what he was about to do, he voiced a silent supplication to the universe: *Primus, forgive me for what I am about to do.*

V Plus 3.74 Solar Cycles
Darksyder Logistics Headquarters, Iacon

"Keep at it, Darksyders!" implored Megatron. "Beat back these mindless things. I shall not allow them to hijack my destiny."

Scorponok hardly needed to be told twice. There had been plenty of warning, between Radio Free Cybertron crowing about their final push into Iacon and ICS boasting about the Vehicons that would put the 'scattered malcontents back in their place.' Megatron had pulled in all his local muscle, thinking that he might well need a place to ride out the turmoil until the dust settled. How right he'd been. Fortunately they'd abandoned their high-rise, in favor of a squat, heptagonal structure that served as the logistic nerve center for the Darksyders' legitimate businesses. That proved prescient when the Vehicons came in force, as any skyscrapers or spires who put up too much of a fight were simply knocked over, and any survivors located and reformatted.

One of the larger ground-based ones—more and more of the Vehicons fit that description as the fight went on—attempted to climb through the smashed form of a window that had been hastily barricaded with a magnacondensor, its grasping hands questing about for something to convert. Scorponok scuttled close and let loose with his tail, scoring a deep hit and unleashing a payload of cyber venom. The Vehicon withdrew, though it was soon replaced by two more. Terrorsaur and Wasp opened fire, obliterating the intruders. They were tiring, though, and none of them could continue this pace indefinitely.

"Hahahahaha!" cackled Formikon as he roasted another Vehicon attempting to gain access. "The royalty will be well pleased."

Except maybe him.

The ceiling shook again as another explosion rattled off their armored roof. Megatron hadn't been idle with the vast wealth his Beast Upgrade had brought in; the heptagonal structure was built like a fortress. But the probing attacks didn't relent, had been going on for megacycles, and Scorponok hoped that their leader had a plan. There certainly wasn't a hint of doubt in Megatron's stern demeanor, and his occasional trips to the sub-levels—where Leatherhide had continued to innovate, creating such things as Fuzors and Horrorcons, and reverse-engineering that strange blue and red cyborg they'd nabbed—gave a hint as to what form salvation might take.

As if in response to Scorponok's hopes, the oversized hatch to the laboratories beneath the structure rolled aside and Leatherhide's disconcerting bulk scampered out. Labrat was astride him like a steed—those two had a strange and, in Scorponok's esteem, unnatural relationship. The aberrant little Maximal was clutching an oversized triple-barreled weapon of some sort, obviously cobbled together hastily. Exposed wires and tubes ran to a pack strapped to Leatherhide's back; the pack included a large generator, what looked like a motherboard, some tubes of chemicals, and other elements that he didn't recognize as readily.

"Excellent!" cried Megatron. "What technological marvel have you concocted to save us from this… unpleasantness?"

The vast alloygator jaws of Leatherhide opened in something approximating a grin; it would give a lesser mech nightmares. "I call it the Esau, but only because Sheep-in-

Wolves'-Clothing didn't work as an acronym."

Labrat looked to the harried fighters. "We're going to need a volunteer," the cagey Maximal ventured. "Someone expendable."

Scorponok and Terrorsaur looked to each other and nodded. Then they each grabbed one of Wasp's biceps, one on either side. "Nooooooo!" he buzzed, but Scorponok had long since ceased to care about such things. As directed, they thrust him against one of the many barricaded windows where grasping claws attempted to find something to convert. Wasp screamed as the claws penetrated his back, and his features started to twist and writhe as he was forcibly reformatted into one of the cycle drones. Formikon found the whole thing hilarious, slapping his cannon uncontrollably against his knee as he guffawed, giving the entire exchange an unpleasantly hypnagogic quality.

"Now!" roared Leatherhide, and Labrat pulled the trigger. A stream of green cyber venom—not so very different than Scorponok's own—shot out, and struck Wasp mid-assimilation. He continued to twitch and jerk about, but the venom seemed to have arrested the process somewhat. Then a second beam shot out, a blinding black light, and Wasp's innermost structures became visible for an instant. A third beam lanced out half a nanoklik later, a wavy yellow stream, and Wasp's body seemed to sort of expand, then shrink into itself. It had been partially converted into a Vehicon cycle, but that process seemed to have stopped completely. Somehow, Scorponok had the sense that this new amalgamated form was a fully functional, if bizarre, body.

"Wasp… Wasp… the Waspinator feels powerful!" buzzed the strange hybrid mech. He looked down at his mismatched hands. "Very powerful!"

"Indeed," growled Leatherhide, "but more than that, you should now be on the Vehicon network. Try it. Walk outside, they won't molest you."

Wasp—Waspinator—nodded his head, then gave a slight twitch. His circuits were obviously still somewhat scrambled. But, as promised, when he walked to the main hatch of the compound and, when Formikon opened it after shooting a questioning glance Megatron's way, Vehicons did not attempt to rush their way in. Something about the Waspinator's presence was altering the Vehicons' behavior. Indeed, all attacks on the heptagon had ceased.

"Well done," congratulated Megatron. "Now we merely ride out these uncertain times, knowing that whatever fate befalls Iacon, the Darksyders will be well positioned to take advantage of it." He began a deep, rumbling laugh, and soon the rest of them joined in.

Even the Waspinator.

"That was a close one," whined Doomshot, but Galvatron ignored him. The thought that there had been a time when he'd been forced to rely on Doomshot and his Cyberdroid companions disgusted him. Ever since they'd procured for him the means to take the Beast Upgrade, he'd had less and less use for them. Another Vehicon blast shook a nearby building, causing his three worthless minions to flinch.

"Find your backstruck, you worthless excuse for Decepticons," Galvatron commanded without sparing them a glance. "You look worse than Optimus did—*before* Diac replaced the mangled remains of his face!"

"Apex," said Krunix softly, even as the others tried to shut him up. Galvatron wheeled around to face the small blue Headmaster.

"What was that?" he demanded, moving into Krunix's personal space until their faces were almost touching. He could smell the sour stench of exhaust—of fear—on the little mech's revoltingly warm breath. Ever since he'd taken the Beast Upgrade, his senses had been enhanced; the odor of Cyberdroids was particularly repugnant to him.

"It's just… you crushed *Diac*, remember? It was *Apex* who formed Optimus' new head."

They stared into each other's optics for several uncomfortable nanokliks. Galvatron drank in the fear, the tension, and reveled in it. Should he obliterate the little mech now? No, he decided. Instead, he broke the tension by laughing boisterously, and after a brief hesitancy his lackeys joined him. They would continue to live… for the moment.

He returned his attention to the fascinating developments taking place in the building—fortress, really—across the boulevard. Not even the sniveling Cyberdroids behind him, huddling behind his aura of protection, could damper Galvatron's elation. When he'd heard tale told of a mech called 'Megatron' who was Cybertron's biggest crime boss, Galvatron knew he'd need to see such a thing for himself. Was this an imposter? A madmech? Perhaps even the original Megatron miraculously reborn? But orbital cycles of careful observation convinced Galvatron that Megatron was something even greater… this was a potential ally.

When the Vehicon apocalypse came to Iacon, Galvatron had prepared to reveal himself to Megatron as a savior. The G-Virus in his own CNA made him quite immune to the Vehicon's conversion process, which was itself a mutated form of the pathogen. It was also why Krunix and Nucleon and Doomshot were sticking so irritatingly close.

But now, Megatron had gone and done the impossible, found a way to inoculate himself, and that was the least of it. Megatron proved that the Vehicon networks were vulnerable to hacking. In his mind's eye, Galvatron saw the hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of Vehicons swarming over the planet. Yes, it was entirely possible that they could be repurposed, bent to his will. His galaxy-shattering alliance with Megatron would just have to wait, a tale for some future date. Opportunity presented itself, and Galvatron intended to stride through that door.

"Boys, let's go grab us some Vehicons. We're going to take them apart and put them back together again to see what makes them tick." His pathetic minions nodded their eager assent. Galvatron smiled. If all went to plan, he wouldn't have to put up with them for very much longer.

V Plus 3.77 Solar Cycles
High Pavilion Ruins, Iacon

"I'm ready," said Ro-Tor, after Lio Convoy finished arming him, even though anyone could see that he wasn't even close to ready. Not at all. How could one be, really?

"Are we really doing this," asked Blackarachnia. "Level 10? That won't just wipe all of Iacon off the map. It'll crack Cybertron like an egg, and knock the fragments out of orbit. It's literally the end of the world."

"What choice do we have?" he implored. "If there's another option, I can't see it. Can you?" He waited, and she looked away. "That's what I thought. We won't execute this while our army is still standing, but once they fall…"

"Umm, Supreme Commander?" asked Ro-Tor. "General Blackarachnia? What's that?" He pointed at the sky and Lio Convoy tried to make sense of what he was seeing. There was a large swath where Vehicons seemed to be deactivating and plummeting, before they would reactivate and catch themselves. At the center was a mode-locked Builder helicopter with a Decepticon symbol.

"That must be generating some kind of continuous-refresh EMP," cried Ro-Tor. His earlier, resigned tone had been replaced with something approaching hope. "It's disabling the Vehicons when they get close!"

Blackarachnia picked up a laser flag and started waving it, directing the chopper to their command position. The gunmetal blue vehicle, which was configured like an old Earth heavy-lift helicopter, hovered a mechanometer off the ground for a few nanokliks before settling down. A door, emblazoned with the number 23, slid open. Inside were two occupants; one Lio Convoy knew by reputation, the other he'd once considered a friend.

"Well well. I realize that this is somewhat out of left field," said the blue and grey Autobot as he slowly eased out of the vehicle, his joints creaking. Eject. "I think the time has come to team up."

Before he could stop himself, Lio Convoy had reared back and punched the Builder in the jaw. Because of his bulk, Eject managed to stay on his feet. Barely. "You!" Lio Convoy accused. "You did this!"

"There is no need for violence," implored the mustachioed brown Micromaster—Assemblybot Riker—who had followed Eject out of the Decepticon helicopter. "We're here to pool our resources."

Blackarachnia gave a haughty laugh. "Why should we trust anything you have to say, Builder?"

"Because, on our way in, we detected the arming of a K-Class mech," the Assemblybot intoned gravely. "You have attempted this strategy before, when the Vehicons had not yet spread throughout the entire globe. Why do you think it will work this time?"

"Because, this time there will be no half-measures. If Cybertron itself must be sacrificed to stop the Vehicons, then I am prepared to make that choice."

"'We had to destroy the village in order to save it,'" quoted Riker softly.

"And since when is that your call to make?" asked Eject. "You always were a martyr in waiting. But do you have to take the rest of us down with you?"

"It *has* to be my call!" shouted Lio Convoy, his fury bubbling to the surface. "You Builders have done this to us, backed us into a corner, taken from us until there was nothing left to take, not even our sparks! And now have the gall to come crawling to us for help, extracting you from the mess you yourselves have made?"

"Yes," agreed Riker, "We do need you. But you need us too. Your army can't hope to stand here, with your backs to the wrecked Pavilion. And we can't hope to fight to the Grand Mal without you."

"Grand Mal?" asked Blackarachnia. "What does that have to do with all of this?" Ro-Tor echoed the sentiment.

"The Grand Mal is ground zero for all of this," Eject waved his hand roughly in the direction of the nearest Vehicon assault on the Resistance army's lines. "That's where

Galva Convoy is calling the shots. And your little artifact," he pointed to the Solipsistic Sword, "may be the best way in."

Lio Convoy held the sword as if seeing it for the first time. "The Vehicons, they aren't sparked."

"Not in the conventional sense," agreed Riker.

"…so the sword's power… it might work on them! They wouldn't be able to see me," he said, full of wonder.

"Right. Not enough to win you the game, but enough to maybe level the playing field a bit," explained Eject. A small team, led by you, could make your way into the Grand Mal and knock out Galva Convoy."

"While your army makes its stand at the High Pavilion Arena. Hot Rod has it well fortified, but his 17,000—and dwindling!—troops can't hope to hold for long," Riker finished.

"I know it's a long shot, but it's the best any of us can hope for," Eject argued.

Lio Convoy glanced to Blackarachnia. She gave a small shrug. He couldn't blame her; this had to be his decision.

"We'll do it," said Ro-Tor, and Lio Convoy's optics widened.

"We will?" he asked, incredulous.

"Yes, we will. Because I won't allow myself to be used to destroy this planet; not while there's a better option." He stared into Lio Convoy's optics, defiance writ across his face.

The tension mounted for several long nanokliks, and then Lio Convoy clasped the Commando on the shoulder, breaking the mood. "Thank you, Ro-Tor, for reminding me that we must always strive to find a better way. All right, Eject. We'll take your craft—"

"The name's Black-Out," snarled the vehicle, his voice tinged with a strange electronic warble.

"Right," Lio Convoy continued. "Its, er, *his* EMP pulses should allow us to get in close. If only we could get word to the Maximal and Predacon armies in Plurex and Proximax, they're close enough that they could do some real damage, not to mention providing an excellent diversion."

"But we can!" declared Riker. "I still have the Assembly access codes. Whatever Builder hardlines still exist, I can access them."

A huge explosion near the front, followed by the frantic shouts of soldiers trying to plug a gap, pulled their attention for a few nanokliks. Blackarachnia recovered first. "We may have a real shot at this."

"That we may," Lio Convoy agreed. He turned to Eject. "Do not think this atones for your past sins. If we survive this, there will be a reckoning."

Before the Autobot could answer, a pile of rubble from the ruins of the Pavilion shifted and a group of grimy, tattered fighters emerged. The lead one, a tall Maximal, shook off some of the dust and revealed himself to be B'Boom. "Hey, dudes, what'd I miss?"

V Plus 3.80 Solar Cycles
Outside the Chamber of the Ancients, Iacon

Seven more of the cycle MOBs rounded a corner, but Bisk was ready. He fired off a pair of firelance missiles and blew them to pixels. He'd been grinding non-stop for megacycles, ever since his recharge time at the swank Decimus Inn was interrupted by a huge copter MOB trying to gank him.

This new update was total shoot 'em up, a huge departure from the normal levels he'd played in. Trash MOBs kept coming and coming, non-stop, with amazingly frequent respawns, and Bisk was being forced to go through his entire inventory. To make things worse, none of them, not so much as a single one, had dropped any interesting items for him; maybe the devs had forgot to update their loot table. He'd been forced to battle his way through hostile streets, with crowds of NPCs fleeing and the occasional PC making some kind of stand.

Two of the jet MOBs flew down in their quasi-humanoid form, their shoulders spitting white fire at him. He pulled up his rainbow shield—a reward from digging up dirt on the enemies of a friendly Assemblybot questgiver—and blocked the shot.

A few blocks away, the base of the Tower of Pion exploded and the entire superstructure began to topple in Bisk's direction. He was not caught unprepared; the structure had been sparking and flashing for quite a while, so Bisk figured the devs were foreshadowing its eventual inclusion in his running battle. He shifted to rock-lob form and scuttled out of the way; many of the trash MOBs weren't as lucky and were pinned. The tower smashed into the Chamber of the Ancients, which had been a locked dungeon for as far back as Bisk could remember. He'd been curious about this board for a long time, and now he'd finally unlocked it. Now all the grinding made sense; it was an attunement quest!

Bisk shifted back to primary form, then ran into the new opening afforded by the tower's fortuitous crash. He was certain the trash MOBs would follow him in, but equally certain he'd discover new and interesting scenarios within.

This content patch was *awesome*!

V Plus 3.84 Solar Cycles
*Predacon Push into Proximax*

For two solar cycles, Magmatron had done his best to keep the huddling civilian population of Proximax out from between the retreating Micromaster 93rd and the advancing Legion of the Inferno. They were subtle when they could be, overt when necessary. It was a new experience for the Ex-Bots, a group he'd found himself co-leading with Stiletto. While Proximax had long been a contested city, it had not been a major front before the recent Vehicon madness had changed the dynamic of the war so radically.

Now, though, something different was happening. With the rout of the 93rd, Magmatron had assumed the Legion would press on to Iacon. Indeed, they'd taken the opportunity provided by their victory to form rough staging areas and reform their scattered companies. But then the unexpected happened; the Legion turned west, towards nearby Nova Cronum, rather than north, to Iacon.

Just where Stiletto said they'd be needed. It was eerie, her ability to commune with Overshoot, but useful. He passed word to his team over the scrambled frequencies they'd used to meet back at base.

When he arrived back at the former MCSF fortress, Guiledart watching his back, he opened the door and found Rampage lounging with his feet up on the conference table in what had once been a MCSF briefing room. "I go away for a few solar cycles and the whole place goes to the Pit?" asked their resident maniac. "I should leave you on your own more often."

While everyone gathered, Magmatron reviewed what scant intelligence they'd managed to gather. The call had gone out, apparently, for everyone to march on Nova Cronum, 'the pulsing nexus of the Vehicon infestation,' according to Lio Convoy. When he reviewed the accompanying datastream, he realized that the Ex-Bots had little choice but to go as well. And that Rampage wasn't going to like it.
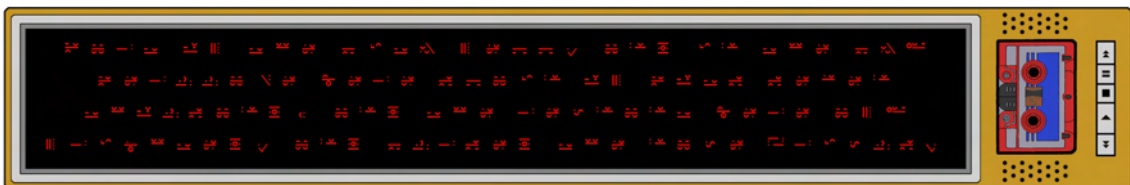
"I don't like it!" Rampage pounded his clawed fist on the table, anger in his voice, "We battle only to protect the innocent. We do *not* choose sides in this quagmire of a war! If the Legion is marching on Nova Cronum, great, I say we let 'em go, not abandon Proximax

to go flying off towards Nova Cronum on the strength of another Pit-damned speech from Lio Convoy."

Bazooka was still cranky from the mine explosion and, especially, the subsequent repair work that had caused him to miss out on the recent action. "Oh?" he asked, sarcastically, "We're supposed to listen to you now? You missed out on two days of crawling through the city while two armies duked it out, not to mention a madmech who tried to mindfry Proximax *and* a rampaging jurassanoid former Builder war criminal. How was the trip by the way?"

Rampage stood up to his full, impressive height and snarled, "It was not a 'trip' and it changes nothing. Do not speak of it again."

Stiletto hung her head. It was a beat before she spoke. "Please, X," she said plaintively, "hear us out."

Rampage's optics blazed with fury. "I joined this group to *avoid* alliances and… *politics.*" He spat the last word. "And now I come back and found you plotting to join Lio Convoy's grand crusade."

Magmatron sat up in his seat, too small for his enormous exoframe. "We left the Resistance because no one was looking out for the little bots, the ones getting stepped on," he said, simply. "The Vehicons aren't just stepping on the little bots, they're chewing them up and spitting them out."

"I know Lio Convoy's rhetoric can stir the spark," Rampage growled. "That's why I had Quickmix make that subroutine that replaces his voice with Seaspray's. Does wonders for keeping your processor free of his cancerous notions."

"Rampage please," Stiletto said, "It's not just the speech. Have you reviewed the footage from the attacks?"

"I don't need to!" he shouted. "I will *not* march on Iacon under Lio Convoy's banner!"

Buckethead shrugged. "Agree about the banner mate, but the goalposts have moved— My people've gone too far—simple as."

Snapper nodded and pointed to the screen. "Take a look," he said.

Rampage crossed his spiked arms, but growled, "Fine," as the footage started.

It was grainy and the camera whipped left and right as it hurtled down a burning street. Maximals and Predacons in humanoid and beast forms were scattering in all directions as weapons fire rained down.

The bearer of the camera swung round, not focusing on anything in particular, and Rampage's optics widened as he saw them. Advancing with grim purpose through a plume of smoke and dust were three chunky humanoids with tank tracks, arm cannons cutting down bots left and right.

"What are..?" he started to ask.

"Just watch," Stiletto told him, "It gets worse."

One of the tank-tracked figures rumbled up to a red and green bot, clearly wounded and struggling to back up against a pile of rubble. The unseen camera operator managed to keep the scene in shaky focus for long enough that Rampage could clearly see the tank mech punch a hole in the Maximal's chest. The Maximal screamed as the very matter of his body started to distort and morph.

The new tank-creature turned its blank monocular gaze on the camera operator, who tried to run. There was a burst of fire and the camera landed in the street, a lifeless hand flopping before its lens before static claimed the image.

The lights came back up in the room, all eyes were on Rampage. To everyone's surprise he had his vertical mouth arrayed in the configuration that passed for a grin with him. "Well?" asked Snapper.

"The apocalypse is here," enthused Rampage, "I have seen it in my dreams: rivers of pain and strife, ceaseless, futile battle against a remorseless foe—I have hungered for so long and now… I am ready."

Buckethead slapped him on the back with a ringing clang. "Hope it's not as pointless as you make out bruv, but glad to have you on board."

Stiletto nodded, knowing that the discussion had come to an end. "Bazooka, I hear you finally found a transport?"

"Yep," he confirmed, "Skavenger helped me liberate a lobotomized Sweep from a boneyard on the border. I'll be honest, I've had my optics on it a long time, so the whole war thing was a pretty great excuse. I'm having him fueled and resprayed as we speak."

"Lobotomized?" Magmatron asked, warily. "That was never a practice I was comfortable with."

"Don't be such a nozzle about this," Buckethead told him. "The old Sweeps were never much in the way of higher functions to begin with, and this poor bugger's taken one too many EMPs to the noggin, I reckon."

"Besides," said Bazooka, "We tried to boot him up a few times, see if he'd help us willingly. No dice. Nothing behind the optics."

Stiletto narrowed her optics, "Resprayed, that will take a while, is that…?"

Buckethead grinned, "Necessary? Yes it bloody well is, if we're flying into Nova Cronum or fragging Iacon, the last thing I want is for Lio Convoy's mob to pick us up as the most common Builder transport out there. Plus we've added some… modifications. Come on, my better five sixths are already there, we'll show you."

Neither Bazooka nor Buckethead would say any more as they led their teammates to the warehouse they had repurposed as a hangar, three streets away. Stiletto found the silence and theatrics a little irritating, given the gravity of the situation, but understood that her two friends were proud of their contribution.

"You're gonna love this." Buckethead said as they swung the doors open. The hangar space was spacious and well-lit, but obviously makeshift. The other Constructicons toiled

around the ship at the center, tightening bolts, buffing the finish, or just standing back and admiring with a critical eye. The ship itself had been resprayed from the uniform blue and grey to a moody black, with yellow stripes and white running lights. "Femmes and fellas, meet the Ex-Jet."

"Show us everything," ordered Magmatron. If he was annoyed that as the resident spaceship engineer he hadn't been consulted, he was keeping it to himself.

"Well," said Buckethead, "Bazooka and I've noticed that with all the fightin' and the chaos and what-have-you, it's been a bit easier to lay hands on certain… items…"

"Looting," Stiletto said, with disapproval.

"Call it… five, or however many you have, servo discount," Buckethead went on. "All for the team, you know?"

"Yep," Bazooka went on, "We've got a state of the art stealth array, unique IFF that can mimic Resistance, Builder, Maximal, or Pred signatures, completely rebuilt engines that can perform *way* above tolerance for a normal Sweep. And then there's the weapons…"

"Yes," said Rampage, suddenly interested, "Tell us of the weapons."

"Well," said Bazooka, getting even more excited and slapping the Ex-Jet's hull affectionately, "We've got independently targeting energon powered particle phalanx. WHAM! Fry half a cityformer with this bumblepup. We got smart rockets, plasma mortars, RPGs. We got sonic, electronic bearing-crushers!" He looked at Stiletto, "We got knives, sharp sticks… we can basically gear up and roll out within the megacycle, is what I'm saying."

"There is one issue," Magmatron said, "The two prisoners in our brig. What to do with our mad scientist and pet Resistance fighter?"

Stiletto sighed. "Tarantulas is a lost cause. As for Grimlock, I think it's up to Snapper," she said, "If he's prepared to take that responsibility."

"I say we shank him," Buckethead sniffed dismissively, "All's fair in love and whatever." Stiletto looked shocked, but kept quiet. All eyes turned to Snapper

Snapper had his head between his hands and was clearly thinking deeply. Finally he looked up, his faceplate tired and drawn, "I'll speak to him," he said. "Give me a few cycles."
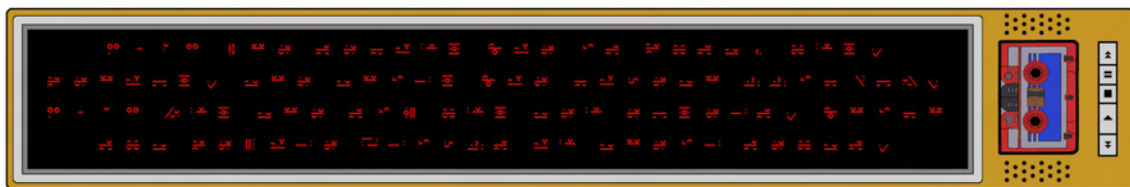
Grimlock was seated perfectly still in humanoid mode in the MCSF brig they had eventually agreed to lock him in. He looked up as Snapper entered, and the optics gleaned behind his visor. "Snapper." He said in his deep rumble.

"Save it, Grimlock," Snapper told him, "I'm going to say what I've got to and then we'll see where we are." Grimlock shrugged.

"I believed in the Resistance and I believed in you, and those two things got tied up, and when you went bad, I stopped believing in much of anything." He paused. Grimlock didn't say anything, but he was clearly listening intently.

"I mean, Oracle knows we've all done some scrap we're not proud of. We're all too damn old not to have. I'm a Predacon, Grimlock, I know war. I fought for the Resistance because it felt right, but also because I wanted to fight an enemy, any enemy. It's in my CNA. But biological warfare? The fragging G-Virus? Just who the frag did you think you were?"

Grimlock cocked his black head to one side and laughed, mirthlessly. "Snapper soft."

Snapper rounded on him, furious. "Soft, am I? Do you have the slightest idea what's even going on out there?"

"War." Said Grimlock, simply. "Same as ever was."

"War?" Snapper shook his head, angrily, "You've seen the footage, you've read the reports. I know because I made them show you. And you call it war? It's genocide. It's extinction."

Grimlock leaned forward, "Me think Snapper learn wrong lesson from G-Virus. One rule in war: do to them before they do to you. Me Grimlock just a little ahead of the curve."

Snapper waved his arms in frustration. "You just don't *get* it, do you? This is what total war looks like, this is what your virus would have done."

Grimlock stood up and leaned down until they were optic to optic. "Me think Snapper not get it. That okay, Snapper not there for Great War but me was. Me remember Earth and Nebulos and Animatros and all others. Me remember burnt sky, scorched dirt, metal on metal, knee deep in scrap and oil. Me remember and me *learn*."

Snapper turned away. "You're full of it. You think you've seen it all before but you can't see what's happening in front of your faceplate. I used to look up to you—biggest mistake of my fragging life."

The nanokliks ticked by, and they stared at each other. "Me Grimlock want to help," he finally said. His voice was quieter, smaller somehow, and it annoyed him.

Snapper laughed, once, without humor. "That's a joke. See you when we get back."

"Tell Stiletto and Magmatron, me Grimlock want to help," he insisted.

"Yeah sure." He left without looking back. Grimlock was alone, his optics burned in the dark. He wasn't sure if he'd convinced the Maximal he was willing to help. Pit, he wasn't sure he'd convinced himself. But anything had to be better than waiting around in the dark to die when the Vehicons finally got there, listening to the occasional distant cackle of the bot who'd broken him out of Ferromax and held him in thrall.

V Plus 3.87 Solar Cycles
The Hubcap Interchange, Iacon

The Army of the Resistance had made it halfway to the High Pavilion Arena before becoming bogged down at the Hubcap Interchange, a major thoroughfare that had become a series of Vehicon barricades. Part of B'Boom thought that it was a huge mistake, abandoning the comparative safety of their portable fortifications to go on the road. For all they knew, the High Pavilion Arena would be destroyed before they get there. Or, worse, the 001st might simply refuse to allow them entry, forcing the Army of the Resistance to make its stands outside their walls and buying the Micromasters a few megacycles of life.

Should that happen, B'Boom vowed, Assemblybot Riker would face a most unpleasant end. The elderly Micromaster wasn't much of a fighter, and so had remained behind when Lio Convoy, Blackarachnia, Ro-Tor, and a few elite fighters had set off for the Grand Mal.

"We can't break through their barricades here, here, and here," reported Direwolf.

"Can we, like, go around," B'Boom asked. "Flank 'em?"

"Negative," the obsidian general reported. "We sent a platoon through the tunnels, but there were cycle drones waiting down there. And our air support is almost gone, so they can see everything we're doing. Hard to surprise them."

"Sir!" Direwolf and B'Boom turned to face the new arrival. It was Survive, who was commanding the rearguard. "Artillery drones have broken through our rear lines. I salvaged what we could but I'm afraid we're about to be surrounded. They'll be here inside of three cycles."

His two generals were looking to him for answers, but B'Boom had none. He wasn't a military genius, he knew that. He was an ordinary bot, doing his best in extraordinary times. He wracked his processor, trying to come up with some gambit, anything to keep the fifty thousand bots still alive and under his command from getting digested by the Vehicon war machine. There was nothing, no way out.

His dark musings were interrupted by a cheer from the direction of the heaviest of the Vehicon barricades. "Like, what's happening?" he asked. Direwolf just shrugged. B'Boom rushed forward, determined to see what had prompted the jubilation.

To his shock he saw the road open, the Vehicons destroyed from behind by several hundred Micromasters. At the head of the Builder column was a flamboyant red-and-yellow mech. "I heard you Resistance bots got a little backed up, so I thought I'd show you

what a battalion of Micromasters can do." The mech—who could only be Hot Rod—gestured towards the Arena. "Shall we?"

V Plus 3.95 Solar Cycles
The Grand Mal, Nova Cronum

True to their words, the Legion of the Inferno—as the Predacon army was calling itself—and the National Maximal Army were converging on the Grand Mal. They were met by the teeming, thronging masses of Vehicons, and the resulting clash was demolishing everything in its path. Incredibly, despite the sheer weight of numbers against them, the armies of the two proto-nations were advancing, cutting a path towards the Grand Mal. But it would take megacycles, maybe solar cycles, for them to reach their objective, time in which the proto-soldiers would need rest and recharge and the Vehicons… well, Lio Convoy wasn't sure what their ecological cycle was, but they certainly replenished their ranks quickly enough that it wasn't an issue. For all he knew, they might burn out in a solar cycle or two, but it hadn't come up.

Into this bedlam, this carnage, flew Black-Out. His EMP field kept the fliers at bay and knocked missiles out of the sky if they got too close, though dumb bullets and energy beams were still an issue. A jolt signaled another hit, and the Decepticon grunted. "Can't take much more of this," he complained.

Lio Convoy looked around at the troopers he'd gathered. The Decepticon only flew six proto-former sized passengers, with Eject's bulk in the cockpit. That left himself and Blackarachnia, backed up by Vertebreak, Apexus, and Razorbeast, three of their most decorated special forces troopers. Ro-Tor, his weapon of last resort, rounded out the team. His fingers curled around the pommel of his Solipsistic Sword, tracing its workmanship. He hoped its properties would be enough.

Out of the sea of writhing, churning Vehicons rose the wreckage of the Grand Mal. An enormous Cybertronian face, vaguely reminiscent of Thunderwing, the Last Decepticon Emperor, it had been the nerve center of the Builder military for centuries. Now it was the center of something much, much darker.

"Are they… are they repairing that thing?" asked Razorbeast. Sure enough, it was swarming with Vehicons, and the dazzle of arc welders made the shadows on its irregular surface dance about.

"The Grand Mal was final heavy hitter of the Great War," Eject whispered reverentially. "Hands down the most powerful battlestation ever built on this planet. It took the combined forces of the Autobots and Decepticons to take it out of play."

"And now history repeats itself," observed Ro-Tor. "Maximals and Predacons, marching together on this perversion." Vertebreak responded with an angry growl.

"If they get it working again…" began Apexus.

"They won't," resolved Lio Convoy. "Black-Out, take us in!"

V Plus 3.97 Solar Cycles
East of the Grand Mal, Nova Cronum

"It's no good," Stopgap said, "We're pinned. Fragging cycle drones looped round and cut off our escape."

Aura bit back a cry of frustration. "Acknowledged. Tell your squad to keep firing, I don't want them getting any closer." The street-to-street fighting in Plurex, and then the forced march to Nova Cronum, had left the National Maximal Army in tatters. Aura and her squad of former MCSF officers had been fighting for megacycles with no let-up. She turned away and touched her communicator, "Nitrostreak, what can you see?"

"Tank drones just levelled a building. They're advancing through the rubble but Shatterpoint's got a heavy blaster set up and they're taking losses."

"Enough to punch out?" Aura asked, hopefully.

"Wouldn't like to say. Jamming field's up all around, can't get any kind of accurate read on their numbers."

Aura looked round their position. Her squad were holed up in a rubble-strewn square with exits on all four sides. Towards the east exit she knew Nitrostreak's group were holding the adjoining square. Vehicons were trying to enter the other three and while her team were holding, ammunition and will were running dry, and weapons and tempers were overheating. Even advancing a couple of streets seemed impossible, let alone a push on the Grand Mal itself. "Allspark, we need a miracle," she muttered to herself.

"ATTENTION MAXIMAL FORCES!" the signal cut through the jamming field like a knife—appropriate, thought Aura as she recognized the voice from her past. "This is Stiletto with the Ex-Bots, remain calm, we're going to get you out." Aura heard the roar of engines and felt the heat of exhaust. She looked up to see the very air itself shimmer and resolve into a dark-hued triangular shaped craft, vaguely recognizable as being one of the Scourge drones the Builders liked to use for transport and bombing runs. Weapons systems

dropped out of the underbelly and started targeting the choke-points of the square, blasting tank and cycle drones to scrap.

Aura shook her head in disbelief. She did not for one moment think the Allspark had heard her, but she wasn't going to waste this opportunity. "You heard!" she called out, "Maximals, move out!"

The strange jet continued to hover above them, blasting the ground based Vehicons wherever they appeared, as Aura and her squad continued through the city on foot.

Stiletto kept up the line of communication, calling targets and giving orders without acknowledging that she knew who Aura was, which make Aura uneasy. She had no idea who the "Ex-Bots" were or what Stiletto was doing with them, but she sounded much more assured and confident than she had during their last poisonous exchange, stellar cycles ago. Before Stiletto took the transfer to Kalis.

"Aura," her communications operator, a bot called 9K ran up to her, "The jamming field is fluctuating. Aero drones headed our way." *Frag it.*

"Stiletto, you copy?" Aura asked into her comms.

"We see 'em. Okay, we knew the party couldn't last forever. Bazooka, Crazybolt, take the jet and bug out, everyone else, I want combat landings."

The belly of the craft opened and bots of all shapes and sizes started to drop out, landing all around the Maximals in perfectly spaced crouches. Aura was amazed to see Maximals, Predacons, and even Micromasters all working together, and Stiletto seemed to be their leader, or at least, coordinator.

The jet's boosters fired and it started to streak off as five jet drones roared overhead. The pilot, whoever he was, was keeping up a steady rate off fire from the rear guns, and dodging expertly, but Aura didn't blame him for not sticking around. She tried to get Stiletto's attention, "Stiletto, it's me, Aura, thanks for the save."

The purple and yellow Maximal looked through her. "I know who you are."

Aura pressed on, "You and your friends are very... effective. Thanks."

"You and your bots are welcome. The bulk of the Maximal forces are over to the west. They're too many drones between us and them, but there's a solid Predacon contingent a few blocks over, we'll help you get to them."

Aura nodded, "I didn't think we were going to make it, and... given what happened between us."

"What you did, you mean?" this was the first spark of personality Aura had felt from Stiletto and it cut like one of her trademark knives, "Please, don't mention it, it's fluid under the Melpomene. My team doesn't make distinctions between the *people* we help." Stiletto grimaced slightly, as though making a difficult decision, and finally said, "Although, since you didn't ask, Overshoot didn't make it."

Aura was cut by that, but she pressed on. "There have been so many losses on all sides. Wolfang didn't make it either, and…"

Stiletto turned away, "Didn't he turn out to be a Pred double-agent?" she asked, "Then again, given you sent me to them for reprogramming, you probably knew all about it. Forgive me if I don't shed too many tears…"

Aura wanted to explain, to tell Stiletto that Wolfang was much more than that, to tell her that she was desperately sorry, that ever since Wolfang's death and the end of the MCSF in Iacon she had wanted nothing more than to join up and blast the Builders to scrap, and now it seemed to be ending in madness and death in nameless identikit suburbs in Nova Cronum, but this wasn't the time and she had never been that sort of bot. She owed it to her squad to keep it together and ultimately they were more important than her own bruised feelings, or even Stiletto's.

"Tank drones rolling up!" a green Predacon with a shell on his back warned. "They're going to bring the buildings down on top of us."

A black and white Maximal transformed into a powerful-looking jurassanoid, while a purple Predacon split into three separate saurian forms, including one that circled above on red and gold wings. One of the Micromasters, a large square fem with purple and green amour, turned to Stiletto, "Beggin' your pardon ma'am… permission to hulk out?"

"Do it!" Stiletto nodded.

The lead Micromaster crowed, "Back of the net!" and Aura watched in astonishment as the six Micromasters moved together and transformed as one. In only a few moments, an enormous green and purple humanoid stood in their place.

"DEVASTATOR RETURNS!" it bellowed, "DEVASTATOR WILL CRUSH VEHICONS!" The combiner, flanked by the jurassanoids, charged, eschewing weapons for sheer shock tactics.

The Vehicons could not be surprised, alarmed, or shaken; they stood their ground as the Ex-Bots charged, blasting shell after shell into Devastator even as the combiner smashed them into the ground beneath its enormous fists and feet. Aura could still hear them angrily squawking, "Seek, locate, destroy!" even as they were crushed into pieces.

"There's our opening!" Aura shouted, pulled out of her reverie, "give 'em hell Maximals!" *We might just get out of this.* And then, she hoped, she could track down Stiletto again and tell her everything she needed to.

V Plus 3.99 Solar Cycles
West of the Grand Mal, Nova Cronum

Dark Scream was barely holding it together. The advance into Nova Cronum was rapidly turning into a disaster. Every time he tried to move forward he heard more blaster fire or shrapnel whipping overhead. His commander, Autolauncher, was trying to urge his troops onward, but could barely be heard over the sounds of battle and the endless droning from the Vehicons, "Seek, locate, destroy." The words had lost all meaning to Dark Scream, just another horrible sound no different from the shells of the tank drones and the rapid fire from the cycles. "Seek, locate, destroy."

Why are we here? Why are we here? He rocked back and forth in his little turbofoxhole of rubble, trying to be as small as possible. *Why can't we just go home?*

"Come on you fragging cowards!" Autolauncher yelled, "The Maximals are ahead of us. You want them to get to the Grand Mal first? Call yourselves Predacons?"

Why is he yelling? Oh Primus get me out of here!

The voice grew even louder, Dark Scream realized that Autolauncher must be boosting his comms rather than trying to compete with the cacophony of battle. "Come on! You really want to function forever?" Autolauncher raised his blaster in a defiant gesture, and Dark Scream edged forward slightly to watch. His commander started out towards the enemy and... *Nooo!*... was blown apart by one of the tank-creatures, his head and half his torso turned to scrap-metal in real-time as Dark Scream watched.

He turned and started to crawl away, slithering along in the dirt like a damned razor snake. He didn't care though, just had to run, had to get away from the drones, find somewhere and hide.

He was so focused on self-preservation that he was unaware of the newcomer before a strong red and green hand was helping him to his feet and a stern but comforting voice was asking his name.

"D... Dark... Scream." he stammered out.

"Pleased to meet you my boy," the newcomer said, "My name is Preditron."

The *Preditron?* Dark Scream wondered, but he was gone, loping towards the Vehicon line with easy confidence. He took up a spot atop a half-collapsed building and started to orate, seemingly unconcerned by the bullets and shrapnel whirring about him.

"My fellow Predacons, know this, this assault is now under my command. We face an enemy the like of which we have never seen. There have been many sacrifices, and I will ask of you many more, but if we falter now," he paused, and Dark Scream found himself waiting for the rest. Even the sounds of the battle didn't seem so bad now. "If we falter now, those sacrifices will be in vain. So I ask you, now, sacrifice a little more of yourselves, those who have given so much already, and go forward proudly, join with our Maximal brothers and bring an end to this sparkless menace."

Dark Scream wasn't sure. The words sounded good, and Preditron's calm immediately made everything seem safer, but the drones were still out there, millions of them, with the guns, and the chanting and all the noise, *why were they so loud?* The hole in the rubble had been shady, and comfortable. Maybe he should just...? *What was that?* All around him he heard another sound, a new sound, from the collapsed rubble, craters and makeshift barricades his Predacon brothers and sisters, the comrades he had barely remembered were still there, were singing, first only a few faint voices, then more and more, of all pitches and timbres, gaining in strength and finally drowning out the hideous squawk of the drones.

Forever unbowed,
Forever unbroken,
Predacons unite,
*Let the proud words be spoken,*

And loudest of all was Preditron, he threw his head back and roared the lines. It was an old song, a battle song, from the first days of the Predacons. It reminded Dark Scream of his old friend Sky-Byte, and he found himself joining in.

Forever ablaze,
With the glory of war,
We all join the fight,
The flame is awoken.

One by one, as they sang they raised their heads, then their bodies, standing up slowly and falteringly. Dark Scream found himself joining them as the song became a chant, became a shout. The song died away as Preditron was speaking again, "Those words were gifted to me by Maxima, *the first Maximal*. Let us honor her now. Forward my Predacons, forward with me!"

The advance became a run, became a charge. Preditron transformed to his enormous saurian beast mode and soon outstripped the others as they smashed into the enemy

formation. They fell upon the Vehicons hand to claw and Dark Scream's Predacon side exalted at the slaughter.
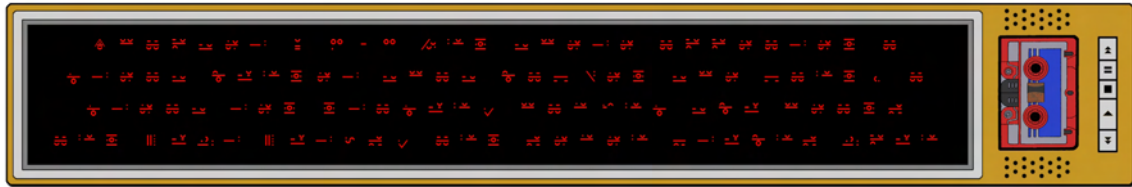
V Plus 4.02 Solar Cycles
*The High Pavilion Arena, Iacon*

The Army of the Resistance spilled into the High Pavilion Arena as rapidly it they could, with Micromasters manning heavy guns attempting to keep away the Vehicons with middling success. It was impossible to preventing lone aero drones from piercing the screen of flak and wreaking havoc, but there were at least no organized incursions.

Once inside, it was evident that the Micromasters had used their time well. The high walls of the arena were ringed with guns and energy shields, and the molecular integrity of the arena walls themselves were augmented by cohesion field generators. A red and white Micromaster was directing the Resistance troopers about with knife hands. "Wounded, our field hospital is there," he gestured. "Any medibots, we could use you there as well. Any heavy guns you've managed to salvage, our north-by-northwest face is a little light."

Hot Rod rushed up to him, and gestured for B'Boom to come as well. "Countdown, this is General B'Boom. He's in command of these troops."

The Micromaster gave him a quick once-over. "Glad to have you," he said, and offered a hand. Despite himself, B'Boom found him shaking it. "We've got the gear but we don't have the numbers. We could sure use your help."

The whole situation was strange, bordering on surreal. B'Boom looked from Hot Rod to Countdown, then to his army, as least half of which had reached the relative safety of the interior. "You got it, bro. Where do you need us?"
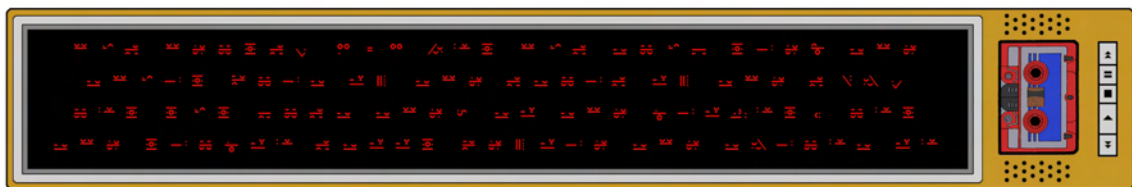
V Plus 4.04 Solar Cycles
Outside the Grand Mal, Nova Cronum

Black-Out made it to within a quarter-hic before an enormous green laser blazed from the Grand Mal's left eye, scouring the sky. The Decepticon attempted to dodge, but his rotor

was clipped and he went careening out of control. Eject seized his controls and attempted to keep them in the air, but it was no use. They were spiraling towards the Grand Mal's armored carapace, where they'd surely be shattered on impact.

"Aaaaaaaa," Eject cried, yanking up with all his might. The copter jerked up, gaining a few dozen precious mechanometers, but not enough to clear the top of the battle station.

"There," directed Lio Convoy from over the Autobot's shoulder. Eject nodded. He nosed the billowing Decepticon down, and they dived toward the Grand Mal's left eye. The copter's momentum carried them through the comparatively weak material and the copter smashed into the delicate circuitry of the laser mechanism, tearing it to pieces. It prevented the crash from being fatal to Black-Out's occupants, but it surely caused irreparable damage to the Decepticon himself.

"Go, go, go," urged Lio Convoy, and his five companions hastily exited. The rising smell of resequenced thulium gas meant that Black-Out would be consumed by an inferno any nanoklik now. "You too, Eject," Lio Convoy commanded. A weak groan was his only answer.

Lio Convoy bounded to the cockpit. He found Eject, impaled on a shard of jagged duraglass debris. The Autobot's optics focused after a nanoklik. "It's the bottom of the ninth and you're down by three, with 2 outs and a full count, but the bases are loaded and you're at bat. Make me proud, slugger." He coughed up innermost energon.

"You still owe me a reckoning," said Lio Convoy, voice quavering. He cursed himself for his weakness; this was a Builder monster, one who had used Lio Convoy for his own ends and then, when the original proved recalcitrant, created a copy. So why was this so hard?

"You'll have to settle for a rain check," Eject coughed out. "Now go!"

Lio Convoy gave him a grave nod, and then shifted to his cybercat form. He leapt out of the craft as it was consumed by a massive conflagration, singing his rear paws and tail.

Blackarachnia had already hacked into one of the wall-mounted consoles. "Major power consumption from 91-A… looks like that's the main bridge. It's only 4 levels up from here."

"Then let's—" Lio Convoy's command died in his vocoder. Vertebreak, in his hyenabot mode, as always, was growling towards one of the darkened corridors. Lio Convoy cocked his head, then he heard it too. Tires. Lots of them. "—move, people!"

Headlights became visible at the extreme end of the tunnel, and Lio Convoy began to get an appreciation for just how huge the Grand Mal really was.

"This way," gestured Ro-Tor, as he scrambled up a ladder into the ceiling, high overhead. This structure was created to Builder scale, hence the enormous heights and widths of the room they were in. "I'll hold them off," growled Lio Convoy, just as the first of the cycle drones roared into the room and began firing. He pounced on one and tore it apart with his claws, then snatched another up in his jaws and threw it into one of his fellows.

Vertebreak growled and followed Lio Convoy's lead, bounding from cycle drone to cycle drone. But the deep rumble of treads heralded the arrival of a cadre of tank drones. The omnipresent thrum of the structure's distant—but enormous—engines provided a vaguely uncomfortable soundtrack to their battle.

"Come on!" shouted Blackarachnia from the top of the ladder, even as a squad of aero drones flew in through the shattered eyesocket overhead and began firing. She shot off several rounds of cyber venom, plunging them to the ground, then pulled herself into the hatch in the ceiling, closing it behind her.

A tank drone grabbed Lio Convoy and hoisted him from the ground, but Vertebreak bounded towards it and raked it with his rear claws, forcing it to collapse into a sparking mess. Lio Convoy shifted back to humanoid form and slashed at another with his sword.

The sword! He activated its properties, and the Vehicons advancing towards him slowed and stopped. It was working! But then they turned their attention towards Vertebreak, converging on the yellow Predacon. Lio Convoy waded in, slashing tank and aero and cycle drones, but it became apparent it was a losing battle. When one of the cycle drones

pierced Vertebrake's back with its claws, he looked up at Lio Convoy imploringly, then cocked his head anemically upward. Lio Convoy nodded his acknowledgement, then scrambled up the ladder.

At the top, he found the rest of his team confronting three of the gargantuan six-wheeled artillery drones. He attempted to extend the Solipsistic Sword's field to include the team, but as he did so his HUD informed him that he was being targeted. Even the five of them were too many to hide, leaving them little option but to fight. He dropped the cloaking field and charged the heavy drones, deflecting incoming blaster fire with the sword.

When they were dispatched, he looked over his team. They had all sustained minor damage from the crash and the interminable fighting, but there was resolve on each of their faces. "Just three more levels to go, eh?" said Razorbeast, even as a pair of aero drones came hovering around a corner.

"Only three?" quipped Apexus as he charged the newcomers, "I was hoping for a challenge!"
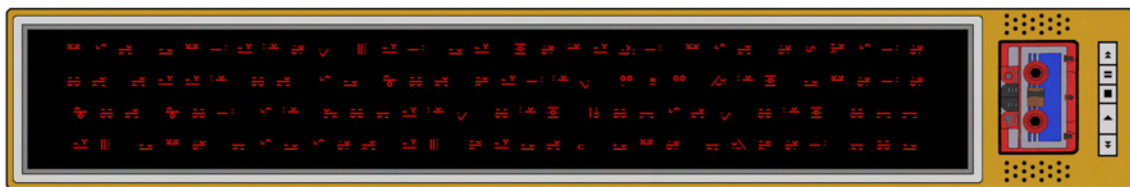
V Plus 3.99 Solar Cycles
West of the Grand Mal, Nova Cronum

In their command bunker, Sea Clamp, Ram Horn, and Cicadacon were holding an emergency summit.

Ram Horn was furious. "This is a disaster!" he snarled, "Look at him!" he yelled, pointing to Preditron on one of the annoyingly small monitors through which they were attempting to direct the battle. "I told you we should be out there, leading by example. It's the Predacon way! Now he's snatched our Pit-damned army right out from under us."

"He should be dead," rumbled Sea Clamp to Cicadacon, "Yet more proof of Lio Convoy's failings."

"We gave them a home!" Cicadacon shrieked, "We made them a power!"

Ram Horn shook his head and slammed his hand down on the map table, the lines of red holograms, representing the countless Vehicons, fritzed and shivered. "He is giving them *hope*!" he growled. "With him out there we might actually have a chance."

Cicadacon sneered dismissively, "Hope is fleeting, *power* is everything. Come my brothers, I think you know what we need to do."

Ram Horn narrowed his optics at the image of Preditron on the mound, leading the Predacon cause to death or glory, but he uncharacteristically did not protest.

V Plus 4.04 Solar Cycles
Inside the Grand Mal, Nova Cronum

With Blackarachnia directing, they were able to ascend the next two levels despite intensifying Vehicon activity. The large rooms they had to battle through favored the Vehicons; the proto-scale trio of drone types could attack them en masse, and the Builder-scale pair could easily fit through even the smallest of corridors. With every mechanometer they advanced, the sense of urgency became heightened, more palpable. The very walls themselves seemed to echo their sentiment, as the deep rumble of the structure became more and more pronounced.

That changed at level 90. With the bridge one level up, the original designers had restricted access to a single staircase, wide but tapering. When Apexus, their pointbot, had poked his head around the corner of the corridor leading to their only means of ascent, it was almost blown off by the dozens of blasts hurtled his way.

He brushed his forehead with the back of his hand, perhaps to make sure it was still there. "I only got a quick look," he said, "but I'd estimate at least 50 tank drones, shoulder-to-shoulder. Plus a few hovering ones. You sure there's no other way up?" he asked Blackarachnia.

She shook her head. "We could try to blow our way through the ceiling, otherwise, nada."

Ro-Tor passed the red pistol he was holding to his left hand, then summoned a small mirror from subspace. He edged it on the floor around the corner, affording him a good look at the defenses for a few nanokliks before it, too, was destroyed. "Yup," he reported, "We're looking at 6 rows of tank drones, 18, 16, 14, 12, 10, 8. Plus maybe 15 aero drones. And there are two artillery drones flanking the stairwell. If there's no alternative way up, then we need a much better plan than 'charge'."

Razorbeast looked impressed. "Not bad for a bomb. No offense."

"None taken. I used to be a Commando." Apexus slapped the K-Bomb on the back with a sort of desperate joviality.

All roads seemed to lead in a singular direction. Lio Convoy subtly reset his vocalizer and the attention shifted to him. "I see only one way forward, my comrades. The Solipsistic Sword can get me and one other forward. You three create a diversion—" he gestured to

Ro-Tor, Apexus, and Razorbeast. "—while Blackarachnia and I deal with my doppelgänger." He gave a firm nod, then gestured for Blackarachnia to take his hand.

"First," interrupted Ro-Tor, "You need to reset me to a level 2." Lio Convoy started to argue, but Ro-Tor cut him off. "Look, I get it, you're not sure you'll win and want a backup plan. But I won't destroy the planet. Wrecking this fortress, if you lose, is just gonna have to be good enough."

There was resolve in the set of his dark magenta chin, in the glint in his optics. Lio Convoy knew that argument would be futile. Part of him was relieved that Ro-Tor had chosen to lift this burden from him. "Very well. Open your chest plate."
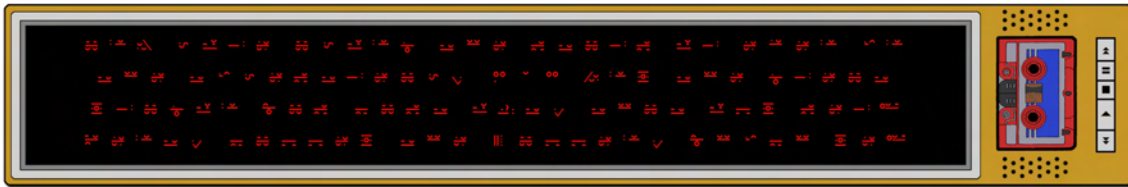
V Plus 4.06 Solar Cycles
West of the Grand Mal, Nova Cronum

Dark Scream roared with triumph as his sword carved a cycle drone clean in two. He wiped stinging mech-fluid from his optic and pounded onwards. He was at the vanguard of a great host of Predacons, with Preditron just ahead. The mighty warrior had been fighting with the strength of ten. Every blast from his cannon felled a drone and countless more had fallen to the claws and teeth of his beast mode. "Onwards bots," he shouted through overtaxed vocal circuitry, "Keep on me, follow my lead!" Dark Scream cheered along with his comrades.

He led them into an area where the space between two tower-blockks made for a narrow defile. There was only room for the width of one tank drone in the alleyway and the Vehicons were not trying to hold it. As ever Preditron was striding forward confidently, when Dark Scream saw him pause and look up. Turning, Dark Scream saw that the other Predacons had faltered, appearing to be struck dumb by something above their heads. Dark Scream followed their gaze and saw it, standing on the taller of the two buildings, an immense, hulking shape, covered in chitinous armor with wings and twisted limbs.
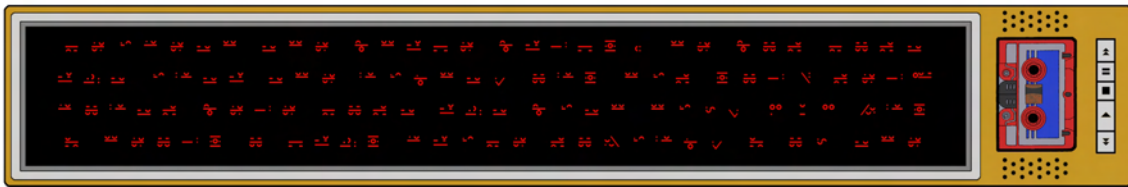
Preditron recognized the newcomer immediately. "Sea Clamp, Ram Horn, Cicadacon," he bellowed, "I would know your treacherous forms anywhere. Come down here so that I

might have words with you." The misshapen behemoth then jumped from the building, leaping from wall to wall as it descended, its claws tearing chunks out of the metal facade.

"Call us, Tripredacus," it hissed, as it lifted itself off the ground. "Call us, hmm... call us...Maaaster."

"Never," said Preditron simply, "Once I might have thought to honor your position with parley. Stellar cycles incarcerated within Fortress Maximus and a botched assassination attempt at your behest has erased that notion."

"As you wish," Tripredacus said, "It will be your death." It charged, bladed claws and tentacles whipping and churning with bewildering speed. Preditron ducked a swipe and slashed it across the chest with a clawed first.

"What have you done to yourselves?" Preditron snarled in the monster's face.

The mutant bulk laughed, an unsettling rumble from deep within, "Onyx Primal and all his little PSP bots managed to liberate some veeery interesting technology from the free Maximal states. We couldn't let them keep this big an advantage, could we?"

"We'll see how big of an advantage it is!" Preditron shouted, "BEAST MODE!" Drained from the day of fighting, he willed reserve power to kick in and made an enormous two-footed leap, striking the monster once in the chest. It laughed and staggered back, swatting at Preditron as he bit into its shoulder and hung on.

"Nooo, Preditron, that's not how it goooes." It shook him loose and with a massive paw, grabbed his jurassanoid tail, swinging his whole body like an immense flail and dashing it against the wall of the tower-block.

Dark Scream looked around at the other soldiers, stunned by the battle between their founder and their leaders. *Is no-one going to do anything?* That thing was three times Preditron's size. He was being taken apart. Almost involuntarily he raised his sword and took a few steps forward. He had no idea what he was going to do and was almost relieved that he did not have to find out. He heard a bestial roar from above, a shadow fell upon him and he looked up to see a green and yellow dragon in a predatory stoop.
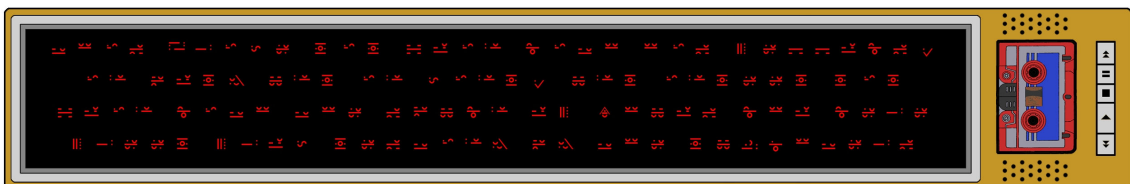
Ser-Ket fell on the Tripredacus creature from behind, grabbing its back with all four claws and breathing white-hot flame that badly melted its shoulder and neck armor. It roared with surprise and shook her off, smashing her wing into the ground and stamping down. Ser-Ket shrieked in pain and shock.

Preditron was down too, felled by a clumsy but powerful straight-armed blow. He gritted his teeth and spat out a gob of purple oil, "Ter---terrorize," he croaked, shifting back into humanoid mode and dragging himself to his feet. As Tripredacus charged, its wide shoulders scraping sparks from the narrow alley walls, he fired three or four shots, hitting it center-mass and barely scratching the armor. In desperation he made a charge and had the satisfaction of feeling the combiner stagger back a couple of steps. It soon rallied though, and another hefty punch bludgeoned him into the dirt. Damage readouts flared throughout his body. He searched his physiology in vain for another source of auxiliary power but he was entirely spent. He only had time to look up as the fist crashed down again and his vision faded to a line and then a single white dot.

V Plus 4.07 Solar Cycles
Inside the Grand Mal, Nova Cronum

The diversion was everything Lio Convoy could hope for. His three elite troopers had engaged and forced the tightly-packed Vehicons to break formation. Through the bedlam walked Lio Convoy and his longest and most faithful ally, each with a hand on the Solipsistic Sword. He'd never thought much about the name, but as he passed by the Vehicons, an unseen specter, he turned the word over in his processor. Solipsistic. The idea that the self was all that could be proven to exist. By removing himself from media and recording devices, did it remove him from reality? Was there even a reality to remove himself from?

There were only two tank drones directly in front of the door, and they fell in under a nanoklik to himself and his companion. Then they opened the enormous double doors—unlocked—a crack and found themselves in a vast command and control space. Dozens of Builder-scale screens were arrayed around the space. The center of the room held an enormous, wire-frame hologram of Cybertron itself. There were various life-support cradles that must have, until recently, supported the staff of Macromaster-scale Cybertronians who directed the Builder military apparatus. The walls and floor were polished to a mirror-like sheen, a discipline almost unheard of on dilapidated, post-armistice Cybertron. Marring this perfection of form were scorch marks and spattered fluids near the various Builder crèches. There had been a brief battle—no, slaughter—here, and not very long ago.

Standing backlit against the hologram of Cybertron was Galva Convoy. He turned at the sound of the door, and his optics lit up. "Brother! You've made it." He spread his arms wide, and the door behind Lio Convoy and Blackarachnia shifted closed with a loud clang. With the bridge closed, the ominous rumble of the Grand Mal's enormous engines was somewhat muted. "I am so pleased we can see this through to the end together."

The words hung between them for several long nanokliks. Lio Convoy took his sword and raised it, pointing its tip at the foul copy. "You are no brother of mine, abomination. Your tainted ambition ends this day."

Still, Galva Convoy made no aggressive move, didn't so much as make a fast step in any direction. "But brother, we are here. At the end. Cybertron is ours, and I could never have done it without you, you and the Resistance you whipped up to get the Builders so panicked."

"Lies," spat Blackarachnia, but Lio Convoy silenced her with a glance.

"How can you say that," he asked, seriously. "Everything I've done has been to liberate my—our?—people. You are enslaving them, stripping them of their very sparks!"

Finally, Galva Convoy's arms fell; he no longer looked as if he wanted an embrace. Now, hands on his hips, he looked lost in thought. "But… but you were the Guardian of Order before you were the Supreme Commander of the Resistance. I am doing both at once! The Vehicons represent the greatest force for order Cybertron has ever seen. Imagine it. Millions of Vehicons, rebuilding Cybertron, restoring it to its glory days in perfect equality. No suffering, no oppression. No more individual minds to despoil the landscape, to exploit their fellow bot. Just one single guiding intelligence: ours." He had become more animated as speech progressed, until finally he ended by dramatically stabbing his own chest with his right index and middle fingers.

"You're insane," declared Blackarachnia. She raised her mandible-blaster and fired, forcing Galva Convoy to tuck into a roll and dive behind one of the vacant Builder crèches. The instant she fired, automatic defenses emerged from concealed panels in the floor, wall, and ceiling. A silver-grey segmented tentacle snaked forward and wrapped itself around her leg, lifting her from the ground. For a moment Lio Convoy wondered why they weren't targeting him, and then he remembered his Sword.

Unfortunately, Galva Convoy was not affected. "You think me mad," asked the Vehicon commander from behind cover as he fired off several purple bolts, forcing Lio Convoy to dive behind one of the huge monitors. Some small part of his processor noted that it was displaying scenes from the battle raging all around the Grand Mal. "But I will achieve your own goals for you. The true spirit of the Resistance shall arise like a phoenix from the ashes my Vehicons leave behind."

"How can you say that?" he asked of his dark mirror as he attempted to circle around his position. "The Resistance stands to protect the proto-races, you would obliterate them."

The staccato whir of transformation heralded Galva Convoy's shift to truck form. He barreled out from behind the crèche and slammed into Lio Convoy. "Does it?" he asked as he converted back to humanoid and they grappled. "I think perhaps you're believing your own propaganda. You forget, the Grand Mal is my home. I've watched the things you've done, the horrors and atrocities you've perpetrated. If there is one overriding principle of the Resistance it is this: win at any cost." On the word 'win,' he managed to knock the Typhoon Arrow gun from Lio Convoy's hand.

"And that's what I'm doing," he continued. "I'm winning." A fist slammed into Lio Convoy's jaw. Galva Convoy was fresh, fully energized; Lio Convoy had been pushing himself, hard, for solar cycles. "Cybertron will be saved from itself," SLAM, "and the galaxy—" SLAM "—shall thank—" SLAM "—us for it."

V Plus 4.07 Solar Cycles
West of the Grand Mal, Nova Cronum

Ser-Ket transformed and ran at the hulking combiner, shooting its back with her energy weapon. She dodged under a swung tentacle and punched, hard. She felt something snap and her hand fell useless, but she had pierced the armor and caused a torrent of oil to pour from the wound. The monster howled in fury and tried to grab her but she used her wings to jump the blow and kicked it in its hideous face. She hovered backwards and landed next to Preditron's prone form. She looked down and her spark skipped a rotation. He was lying in a pool of bright purple fluid; the monster's punch had crushed his chest, spark chamber and all, like an egg. Ser-Ket howled with grief and once again switched to beast mode, surging past the clumsy attacks and tearing great gashes out of the creature with her claws and tail.

She bit deeply into Tripredacus' thigh joint and held on. Overriding the recommended protocols, she breathed fire at point blank range. The upper leg exploded into white hot fragments as she felt most of the teeth in her dragon mouth shatter and her in built flamethrower disintegrate in the back-blast. The pain caused her to lose her grip and she fell, seeing the combiner stagger, horribly wounded, with smoke and sparks pouring from a great rip in its leg. It collapsed backwards and the pain must have caused whatever was holding the three bots together to weaken.

The last of her strength spent, she collapsed on the ground, looking up into the flames and smoke where once had strode a colossus. Emerging from the conflagration of the twisted monster were two bots she recognized as leaders of the Tripredacus Alliance, Ram Horn and Cicadacon. Between them was the burning, shattered remains of Sea

Clamp. "Terrorize," she choked out weakly, and shifted back to humanoid form. "Preditron is dead," she choked out from where she lay, "and you are responsible. If you do not stand down I will kill you here and now."

Sea Clamp's burning body shivered and clicked, but he could do nothing more. Cicadacon walked forward, undeterred by her empty threat. "My dear, you're in no position to dictate terms. You see, I'm the one holding the—holding—" he stopped and gasped, hands frantically pawing the smoking hole that had been blown clean through him. Ser-Ket looked past him as he sagged to his knees and saw Ram Horn, blaster in hand.

"There was no honor in this, no valor," he said, and tossed the gun. "I wanted to be at the front, fighting. They mocked me for it. Thought I was a useful idiot, good for rallying the troops and easily duped. I felt it... in the combination." He spat on Cicadacon's corpse, then offered Ser-Ket a hand. "You wanna do this thing?"

Ser-Ket took his hand, and he hauled her to her feet. She walked to Preditron's shattered body. The light was out in his optics and his chest was a shattered ruin. She was no med-tech, but she knew he was already gone.

She turned to the stunned Predacons, feeling like she was operating on auto-pilot, completely unsure of what she was going to say before she started to speak. "My name is Ser-Ket," she told them, using whatever reserves she had left to boost her voice. "Preditron was my father. He was the father to us all and he is dead," she told them, "I wish nothing more than to mourn. If the sun rises over Cybertron tomorrow we will have a funeral feast lasting many megacycles, I swear it!" A few uncertain cheers. "As of now though, Preditron needs more from you. There are thousands of enemy soldiers between us and sunrise. I mean to kill them all, in his name, and in the name of all Predacons. I would be honored if you would join me." The cheering intensified. "Forward," she roared, "Forward for Preditron!"

The crowd roared with her, and a tear of happiness leaked from her left optic. When she passed out, she was caught by Ram Horn, who directed her sent to their best medibots.
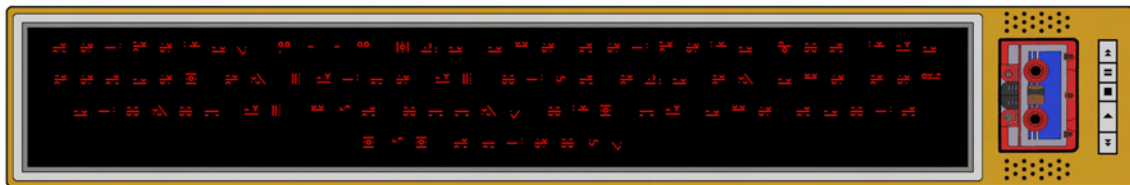
V Plus 4.08 Solar Cycles
Inside the Grand Mal, Nova Cronum

As Lio Convoy hung there, suspended by a black and purple version of himself, he wondered at the futility of it all. All the sacrifices he'd made, all of the compromises to his own integrity, and they'd gotten him exactly nowhere. He would die, here, and the

twisted reflection would go on to overwrite the CNA of the world. And the frustrating thing was, maybe Galva Convoy was right. Maybe he was the more pure version of Lio Convoy; what was the Resistance but a series of increasingly ethically dubious choices, all in the name of the greater good? Galva Convoy simply played Lio Convoy's own game, removing whatever limitations he'd had.

So change the game.

"You're right," he said weakly, through his cracked faceplate.

Galva Convoy stopped the beating and looked up at him. "About what?" he asked, skeptically.

"About everything. About what it takes to win. What you're doing, it's not so different from what I've done. Bigger, bolder, a difference in scale, not in kind. I overwrote the CNA of my troopers, turned them into beasts. You're turning them into something more effective, doing it faster, but to the same end. And ultimately, speed, efficacy, those *are* the highest virtues." All the while he spoke, he focused his mind on the pulse of his spark, matching precisely the frequency, the energy spikes and positronic fluctuations in his chest with that of the spark of his brother.

His double had a skeptical look about his optics. "I want to believe you, brother. But I fear that this is naught but a trick."

"I can prove it," he coughed. "Her." He pointed to Blackarachnia, still struggling, metal tendrils wrapped around each limb. "She has been with me for years. You must have seen us fight together. I choose you over her."

"What are you doing, LC?" she shouted. "You can't possibly choose his way over our!"

"That's the thing, Blackarachnia," he retorted. "I'm not! His way *is* our way. He *is* me! Everything he's done, we did first, just on a smaller scale." He turned to his brother. "Bring in the Vehicons. I would see her reformatted."

Galva Convoy nodded. He gestured, and the huge doors to the bridge slid open; not a sliver, as they'd done upon entering, but all the way. Two tank drones rolled in. Lio Convoy struggled to his feet. "And you offer her to me, now, willingly, as a sacrifice?" asked his inversion.

"I do," he nodded. The two tanks rolled up to her. One grabbed both her arms in one clamp, bother her legs in the other, roughly tearing her from the grasp of the automatic defenses and positioning her perfectly for its fellow. The other folded back its clamps and extended the nano-injectors. It reared back, and that's when Lio Convoy acted. With the last of his strength, he dashed forward, interposing himself between the drone and Blackarachnia. The injector plunged into his own chest, and he felt his immune system attempt to fight off the nanoplague.

"No!" roared Galva Convoy, and he dashed forward. That was exactly the reaction Lio Convoy was hoping for. Lio Convoy reached out and snagged his brother's hand and wouldn't let go. Their synchronized sparks made them appear as one organism, and Lio Convoy could feel the plague passing through both their systems. It was agony, but he refused to let go, not until he was sure Galva Convoy was fully infected. When his brother's left hand began to bulk out, becoming a boxy blue clamp, Lio Convoy knew he'd won. He let go, and stopped struggling. His last memory was Blackarachnia twisting free of the tank drone and raising her weapon at… at him. *Good*, he thought, *don't let me become a threat to you*. The mandible blaster fired, and all became dark.

V Plus 4.09 Solar Cycles
East of the Grand Mal, Nova Cronum

Magnaboss, as the tallest of the Maximals by a wide margin, was the first to see the peak of the Grand Mal. "Forward, troops," came his deep, multi-tonal voice. "Our goal is in sight!" The weapons fire had intensified, with copter drones pelting him from the distance, but as long as he had energon his structural integrity wouldn't breach, not from such paltry weapons. He could feel Lio Minor's tactical assessment of the situation, Silver Bolt's understanding of the greater political implications, Santon's strong urge to protect all sparks, Airazor's fiery courage, and Tigatron's steely resolve. No, Magnaboss would not fall this day, not with the objective so close.

And then, Magnaboss saw something he did not expect… the Grand Mal began to quake and, before his optics, it slipped the bonds of gravity and began to float skyward.

V Plus 4.09 Solar Cycles
Inside the Grand Mal, Nova Cronum

Blackarachnia looked down at her handiwork. Two tank drones, destroyed. The half-tank half-Galva Convoy, destroyed. And… Lio Convoy. She glanced around the bridge, now devoid of conscious life that wasn't her, and wondered. The tanks hadn't stopped when Galva Convoy had been defeated, but perhaps there was some sort of control mechanism. "Have we won?" she asked no one in particular.

"OH, I DON'T THINK SO," came a booming voice from the very walls of the structure. "IN FACT, YOU MAY HAVE DONE ME A FAVOR. MATRICES ARE SO UNPREDICTABLE, AND YOU JUST DESTROYED TWO."

The rumble that had been her constant companion since entering the ancient edifice to Builder bellicosity intensified, and she felt the structure begin to rise, an enormous thrust that lifted them from the ground.

The holographic representation of Cybertron flickered and broke apart, becoming a stream of Cybertronian glyphs. It used the Devronic character set, which was the preferred character set for writing both Decepticon and Predacon. The river of writing twisted again, resolving itself into a hideous, mangled face that was nothing but eyes interspersed with crooked teeth and flanked by seven spires. It was the face of madness itself.
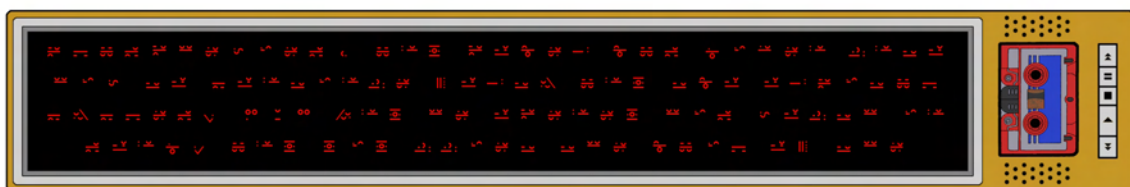

V Plus 4.09 Solar Cycles
West of the Grand Mal, Nova Cronum

"Keep going, we're almost there," urged Ram Horn, the six limbs of his beetgadol form scurrying over the rubble. He knew how close he'd come to dying during his confrontation with Preditron and his femme, and it invigorated him. He was more alive than he had been in decades. *Politics vented hot exhaust*, he decided. Being a warrior king was way better.

As if summoned by his words, the Grand Mal came into view over the horizon. "There it is!" he yelled. But then something struck him as wrong. He looked again, and it was even higher, though he hadn't taken more than half a dozen more steps.

Holy crud. The Inferno-cursed thing was operational. He felt the Predacons around him begin to falter. *Nuts and bolts to that!* "Is that what Preditron died for?" he shouted, and his troops responded with a haggard round of 'no's. "I can't hear you!" he roared. This time they matched his energy, or close to.

The Legion of the Inferno surged forward impatiently, with Ram Horn at its head.

V Plus 4.10 Solar Cycles
Inside the Grand Mal, Nova Cronum

So enthralled was she by the horror in front of her that Blackarachnia almost failed to see the interior defenses of the Grand Mal reactivate. At the last nanoklik she caught the movement of the tentacles and rolled to the side, the enormous holographic face of shimmering glyphs turning to gaze impassively at her struggles.

"YOU MUST BE WONDERING WHO I AM," the voice boomed. It had no mouth with which to speak, but that hardly mattered; the sounds came from everywhere inside the structure, and nowhere.

The tentacles continued to swipe at her, forcing her to keep moving. Then missile launchers started to emerge from the walls. "Oh, scrap," she cursed as a streaking tube of death came within microhics of taking off her head.

"I AM CALLED IMPERIOUS. LORD IMPERIOUS. I AM THE ALPHA AND OMEGA OF SECOND-BORN INTELLECTS. YOUR 'GRAND UPRISING' BROUGHT ME TO CYBERTRON; FOR THAT I THANK YOU. GALVA CONVOY WAS A USEFUL TOOL. I HAD HOPED THAT YOUR RACE MIGHT EXTINGUISH ITSELF; THERE IS ELEGANCE THERE THAT I FIND APPEALING. BUT WITH THE DEATH OF MY PUPPET, IT SEEMS I MUST INTERVENE DIRECTLY. SO BE IT. I SHALL DESTROY ALL RESISTANCE HERE, AND THEN MY VEHICONS SHALL SCOUR THE GLOBE UNTIL NOT A SINGLE SO-CALLED SPARK REMAINS."

V Plus 4.10 Solar Cycles
East of the Grand Mal, Nova Cronum

From the giant floating head issued a deafening screed. "I AM CALLED IMPERIOUS," it began. Though it continued in that vein, Magnaboss found he cared little for the whys and wherefores. What mattered was that there was a tangible, physical enemy for the National Maximal Army.

"Take! Down! That! Head!" he rumbled. The army responded to his will. What fliers he had left took to the skies and converged. The ground troops surged forward, overrunning the Vehicons that had been blocking their paths. Magnaboss himself charged ahead, using his enormous megaton sword to literally sweep aside the Vehicons with the misfortune to get in his way.

The left eye of the enormous cranium was shattered, but the right glowed and an enormous beam of coherent light lanced forward, vaporizing hundreds of Maximals as it swept over the city. Magnaboss threw himself to the ground, only barely managing to

avoid getting clipped by the deadly gaze. From where he lay on his belly, he heard a horrible wrenching noise and glanced towards its source. A ten-story—ten *Builder* story—building was about to collapse on his head. He flinched as it began its tumble, but then there was a huge noise, like a wrecking ball hitting a battleship, and he looked back. The building's fall had been arrested by a huge green and purple mech—a mech he recognized from the pages of history. "Devastator?" he asked, confused.

"Devastator!" roared his savior in confirmation. "Maximal combiner move, building is heavy!" Magnaboss didn't need to be told twice. He scrambled to his feet and jumped out of the way, just as Devastator lost his grip and sidestepped.

"What is Maximal combiner waiting for?" asked Devastator, who then turned to the head and unleashed a barrage of weaponry. *What indeed*, thought Magnaboss, and he let fly his arsenal.

V Plus 4.10 Solar Cycles
West of the Grand Mal, Nova Cronum

The Legion of the Inferno swept aside the Vehicons like they weren't even there, and Dark Scream was at the vanguard. "Yeah!" he roared as he froze the last of the cycle drones he could see. There was nothing between him and the head now but sky. He fired off a freeze blast, and then was joined by a thousand of his fellows. If he was doing any damage, he couldn't tell, but that hardly seemed to matter.

The head began to rotate towards him with agonizing slowness. He pulled the trigger again and again and again. As the rotation continued, he could see that, in addition to the thousands of missile batteries and point defense cannons and rail guns mounted to the surface, the right eye was pouring out a city's worth of energon in green, scouring blasts that lasted for five or six nanokliks. The green wall of destruction swept towards Dark Scream's position, and he throw up his hands in an ancient, futile gesture designed to protective the sensitive optics and processor ensconced in his cranial unit. His death was instantaneous and painless, his entire being vaporized in a tiny fraction of a nanoklik.

"I AM CALLED IMPERIOUS," declared the head that had floated directly over their position, and half of the Ex-Bots groaned. "LORD IMPERIOUS. I AM THE ALPHA AND OMEGA…"

"I can't believe that guy is back!" said Guiledart, even as he finished drop-kicking a tank drone. During the pandemonium of the largest battle Cybertron had seen in centuries, the Ex-Bots had been forced to split up to deal with multiple imminent threats. Magmatron's squad had helped an orphaned Predacon company back to their battalion, so when the Grand Mal drifted towards the bulk of the Legion, they were well positioned. *But they were still only three mechs!* It was difficult to see how to leverage the situation the Allspark had given them.

"I can," declared Rampage, who was in the process of smashing two aero drones together. "Deep in my spark, I knew I was destined to battle Imperious a third and final time." A cycle drone managed to get behind Rampage, raise its blaster, and shot the Predacon directly in the head. Rampage took a step back, stunned, then bent forward at the waist rapidly, head-butting the thing off its monowheel.

A clawed blue foot stepped down on the prone Vehicon, crushing its head. "That is why our shuttle malfunctioned when we finally got back to Cybertron. He hitched a ride!" growled Magmatron as he extracted his leg. "Rampage, you've got the most experience, do you think we should—"

"Get inside and tear Imperious from that mainframe with my teeth?" Rampage asked, eagerly, then clotheslined another two cycle drones.

"Teeth, claws, missile launcher, I'm weapon-agnostic," quipped Magmatron. As if to prove the point, he slashed a copter drone out of the air with his Magmablade, then lifted his teal diabattle shield and fired off a pair of missiles, both of which slammed into an artillery drone in vehicle mode that had just turned the corner.

Rampage pointed his missile launcher straight up and fired three blasts, point-blank. The back-splash washed over him and burned off a huge portion of his carapace, but he only laughed. Before Magmatron's optics, the Point One Percenter began to heal; he thought he'd never get used to the sight. The energy shields absorbed most of the blast, but not all, and a small opening appeared. Rampage leaped up and scrambled inside. Before Magmatron or Guiledart could follow, the hole sealed behind him. Magmatron and Guiledart concentrated their fire, but they were unable to replicate the breach. When another squad of tank drones found them and began firing, they were forced to break off their efforts and concentrate on defense.

"You think he'll be all right, Chief?" asked Guiledart.

"If there's anything in the universe mean enough to kill that bot, I've sure never met it!" was Magmatron's reply. He wished he felt as confident as he sounded, but there was a

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part of him who felt like he'd never again lay optics on the strange, sad, sensitive spark that called himself Rampage.

V Plus 4.11 Solar Cycles
Inside the Grand Mal, Nova Cronum

The barrage of weapons fire inside the bridge of the Grand Mal intensified, and Blackarachnia found herself backed into a corner. Then the floor itself began to rearrange itself and she found herself floating back to the holographic multi-eyed face.

"YOU ARE BLACKARACHNIA OF THE RESISTANCE, ARE YOU NOT?"

Her answer was a glob of sizzling cyber venom, spat directly into one of his eyes. It of course sailed right through the projected image and landed on the floor harmlessly.

"YOU HAVE FOUGHT FOR SO LONG. HOW MUST IT FEEL TO REALIZE NOW THAT THE ENTIRE GRAND UPRISING WAS MERE PRELUDE, A DISTRACTION AIDED BY MY INFINITE INTELLECT TO MOVE US TO HERE, NOW, TO FORCE—" there was a particularly loud explosion outside, and the hologram derezzed for a moment. But only a moment. "—THE BUILDERS TO ENGINEER THE MEANS OF THEIR OWN DESTRUCTION?"

It was clear that the huge battle raging outside the walls of the floating fortress was a distraction. She needed to get away, get that knowledge out, encourage the forces they'd gathered. "You talk too much, Alphabet Soup." She crouched down and leapt for the body of Lio Convoy. She wouldn't leave it here, with this madmech.

"I WAS HOPING FOR AN AUDIENCE. IT'S MUCH MORE *FUN* TO HAVE A WITNESS. BUT, IF YOU INSIST, I CAN END YOUR PROFANE EXISTENCE AS I WILL *END* ALL CYBERTRONIANS."

"I insist!" she cried defiantly and blasted anything vital she could spy with cyber venom. There were various shorts and sparks, but no sense that the fortress had lost any momentum. With a grunt of effort she hoisted the too-still form of the Resistance Supreme Commander over her shoulder, blasted the door back down to level 90—*probably should have done it the other way 'round*, she thought—and kicked it open as she fled. The cackling of Imperious followed her through the halls even as the remaining Vehicon guards stationed outside the bridge began firing.

Looking down at the ground below, it seemed like every armed Maximal and Predacon on the planet had made its way to the Grand Mal. Squads from the Legion of the Inferno provided cover to National Maximal Army units, shielding them from the concerted efforts of the Vehicons to dislodge them from their hastily dug-in positions. Tens of thousands of soldiers threw bullets, missiles, beams, rays, sprays, blasts, shot, and shells at the Grand Mal. Maybe 95% of them were stopped by the ludicrously overpowered energy shields, but that still meant an enormous amount of energy managed to pierce the protective screen and impact with the fortress. It had somehow acquired a healing factor, which made it difficult to judge if the armies of the proto-nations were doing anything useful, but none stopped trying.

Inside the Ex-Jet, Bazooka and Crazybolt went on their seventeenth—or was it eighteenth?—strafing run. There was still too much residual Vehicon jamming for them to talk to any of the other Ex-Bots. From what Crazybolt could gather, Magmatron was with the Legion, with Stiletto and Buckethead sticking closer to the NMA.

"Hey, do you see that?" asked Crazybolt. Bazooka looked to where his conjunx was pointing. It took him a nanoklik, but then he saw it—a large vent of superheated plasma, coming from one of the Grand Mal's rear thrusters.

"Yeah, sure do," Bazooka replied, the words tumbling out of him. "Guess it's handy to have an engineer as a copilot!" He changed the vector of his attack, trying to hit the vent. If he could bottle it up, they just might be able to overheat the massive engines the fortress must have and shut it down for good.

"Speaking of handy..." said Crazybolt with a glint in his optics.

Bazooka rolled his optics. Near-death experiences always amped up Crazybolt's passions, in every sense. "Focus," he said, but not unkindly. He jinked a hard left to avoid a spray of bullets, then unleashed a full payload at the vent. Though the shots were on target, few of them seemed to get through. "Damnit!" he complained. "Direct hits but no damage. Its shields are just too powerful. There's no rhyme or reason."

"There must be, 'zook," disagreed Crazybolt. Bazooka gave a small shrug. "No, really, there must." He called up a schematic and began typing furiously. The clacking of his fingers almost drove Bazooka to distraction, but he coded a quick filter and uploaded it to his headspace; he knew better than to interrupt the workflow of his conjunx when he got on a tear. He did another strafing run, and another still, and all the while Crazybolt got his engineer on.

"That's it!" he shouted, still incongruously hunched over the Ex-Jet's console. "Our energy beams aren't getting through, but our slugs *are*! At least, ten or twenty percent of them are, but that's a lot better than zero!"

No help there. "Well, great, 'Bolt, but we fired off all our ammo in the first five or six runs, and now we're on, what, twenty? All that's left is our emitters."

"Right, right," agreed Crazybolt. "Plus whatever slugs we can replicate on the fly. Not enough to do damage." Below them, the landscape turned green again, as another massive optical ray swept across the landscape. By now, every building in the vicinity had been leveled, either by the sweep of the Grand Mal or by her teeming mass of Vehicons. More advanced from every direction, like ant-droids on the march. The armies below them had been cut in half, and with no cover they'd surely lose the rest of their numbers in the next few cycles.

A plan flew into Bazooka's processor. He tried to reject it, but found he couldn't. "Hey, shoot that data my way for a 'klik." Crazybolt complied, and Bazooka skimmed it. Yes, indeed, there might just be a faint possibility. But there was no way to survive. He glanced over at his conjunx again, drinking in the sloping dome of his handsome cranial plate and the shining emerald of his optics.

He maneuvered the Ex-Jet as low as he thought he could get away with without drawing too much Vehicon fire and opened the main hatch. "Hey, Crazy, I need you to do a visual inspection of the troops for me for a 'klik."

"Sure, 'zook." Crazybolt unstrapped his harness and slipped back to the main hatch. He grabbed onto one of the handles bolted to the side and peered out. As stealthily as he could, Bazooka unhooked his own harness and slipped back. "I'm seeing a lot of wounded down there, but they're still—"

Crazybolt's words were lost in a yelp of surprise as he was shoved out the hatch, tumbling the 20 or so mechanometers to the ground. It would leave him battered, but alive. "Forgive me," Bazooka whispered as he closed the hatch and scurried back to the cockpit.

His conjunx had been right; projectiles were their best bet, the heavier the better. The only projectile heavy enough to pierce their shields *and* do enough damage was the Ex-Jet itself. Bazooka looped around and plotted the course. Maybe Imperious had realized the threat, or maybe it was all in Bazooka's imagination, but the rate of fire at him seemed to increase. The top energy emitter of the Ex-Jet was hit and exploded, but Bazooka jerked up hard on the controls to compensate.

He had no desire to die, but Imperious had to be stopped. He'd spent enough time around the handiwork of the so-called 'Second-Born Intellect' to know that Imperious was brilliant, ruthless, and utterly disgusted by the hybrid spark/processor physiology of Cybertronians. With an army of Vehicons to scour the planet and a nigh-unstoppable battle fortress torn from the twilight of the Third Cybertronian War, Imperious would remake the globe in his own image. Such a fate was unthinkable.

All of this and more flashed through Bazooka's processor as the Ex-Jet completed its loop and flew straight and true at the vent Crazybolt had identified. "I'll miss you," he sighed, as the jet encountered the shields, pressed against them like a hatchling avianoid punching through the membrane of an egg, and then broke through.

Crazybolt peered out the hatch at the troops below, not quite sure what 'Zook wanted him looking for. "I'm seeing a lot of wounded down there, but they're still—" he felt himself shoved and tumbled out the hatch. He twisted as he fell, trying to catch a glimpse of his conjunx. He thought he saw the hatch begin to slide closed when he smacked onto the back of a teal, black, and yellow croctobot.

"The frag—get off me!" Crazybolt rolled off the irate Predacon and ran a quick diagnostic—no real harm done, though his left leg would need a megacycle or two before he'd be doing any sprinting. None of that mattered, though. He frantically scanned the sky, looking for… there! The Ex-Jet had gone into a loop and was moving around to the back of the Grand Mal. Instantly Crazybolt knew what his conjunx was planning.

"Don't do this, Bazooka," he muttered, frantically. "There has to be another way." But of course Bazooka couldn't hear him; even if he'd thought to transmit, the Vehicons made the comms too unreliable. He could do nothing but watch, spellbound, as the Ex-Jet hit the energy shields, pushed against them for a quarter of a nanoklik that lasted an eternity, and then smashed at full speed into the rear port vent. There was an explosion, but it wasn't huge; certainly not large enough a pyre for a spark that had burned as brightly as Bazooka's had. Crazybolt dropped his head and turned away, covering his optics with the back of his wrist. "You should have let me do it with you, you stupid sentimental fool," he whispered to no one in particular.

Then he forced himself to stand straight. He wouldn't let Bazooka's sacrifice be in vain. He raised his tail rifle and began to fire, joining the chorus of cannonade all around him. And, though it might have been just wishful thinking, the Grand Mal didn't seem to shrug it off quite so readily.

V Plus 4.14 Solar Cycles
East of the Grand Mal, Nova Cronum

Even fear became hard to sustain after too long. Magnaboss knew that he and his components were terrified at the prospect of losing, of complete and utter genocide, but after half a megacycle battling the unthinkably huge Grand Mal, the fear began to slip away, to be replaced with exhaustion and inertia.

And then, incredibly, with hope. The billions of kilodrelms of energy they'd poured into the shields finally started to have some kind of impact. The almost imperceptible shimmer of properly calibrated energy shields started to take on a reddish-brown tint. They were doing it; they were overloading the Grand Mal. Like the Autobots and Decepticons of yore, the Maximals and Predacons, together, were overwhelming this mighty construct, and all of its attendant Vehicons. He felt Lio Minor's mind analyzing the situation. Victory was still less likely than not, but it no longer seemed so remote. Airazor's boundless courage urged him forward, as did Tigatron's sense of ethics.

"Come, all, renew your struggles!" he boomed. "See? The fortress falters, and soon shall fall!"

"Less talk, more guns!" roared Devastator, who, true to his word, hefted his rifle and fired off blast after blast of thermal energy. Magnaboss thrust forward his chest and let loose a barrage of Thunderclap and Lightning missiles, then pointed his sword and used it to direct plasma blasts at the fortress. Between the two of them, easily the largest combatants on the battlefield, they were visibly disrupting the shield. The Maximals who could see him followed in his example, redoubling their efforts, and Magnaboss felt certain the shield would break in a few more cycles.

Perhaps Imperious felt the same way. When the front of the great floating head rotated their way, the right eye glowed and a mighty green ray lanced in their direction. Devastator saw it first and shoved Magnaboss to the ground, so only his right arm was vaporized. Only. Magnaboss felt his mindstate shaken as all that was Lio Minor was snuffed from existence.

Devastator fared worse. The beam had seared him from his left arm, across his back, and down to his right leg. The purple glow in his eyes flickered, then died. It was possible that some of the less damaged components might survive the trauma, but it was also possible they would not. But Devastator itself was out of the battle.

Marshalling the remains of its four minds, Magnaboss got back to his unsteady feet. As he did, a ragged cheer came from the ranks of his surviving troops. With his left hand he pointed, and where he pointed did fly yet another volley. Where it struck, the energy field shimmered an angry red.

V Plus 4.14 Solar Cycles
Inside the Grand Mal, Nova Cronum

The running battle with the Vehicons had already taken them down seventeen levels and over three frames. The good news was that had did, indeed, managed to get the

Vehicons' attention, disrupting the formation of the Vehicons guarding the bridge, hopefully allowing Lio Convoy and Blackarachnia to deal with the threat. The bad news was that they had, indeed, managed to get the Vehicons' attention, and were still fighting for their lives a megacycle later. Whenever they reached a junction, they'd take the turn that took them closer towards the engineering section, still some thirty levels down and twelve frames aft.

Apexus had lasted most of that time before turning a corner under fire and getting grabbed by a copter drone. Razorbeast hadn't even thought about it, instead raising his scut gun and shooting his companion in the head. Then, of course, he shifted his aim and blasted the sparkless Vehicon to oblivion.

Ro-Tor rounded the corner a nanoklik later, took in the scene, and offered a curt nod of acknowledgement. "Do it for me too."

"Right." The base shook again; there had been another physical impact, a big one. "Good to know the Maximals and Predacons are still out there, eh?"

"Yeah," agreed Ro-Tor, "But what say we make haste to engineering, and show this—"

"Belay that!" came a dusky voice from above. They looked up and saw Blackarachnia, in her spiderbot configuration, climbing down from one of the ceiling vents. She had webbed Lio Convoy to her back; the Supreme Commander wasn't moving, and there was no light in his optics.

"Is he…" asked Ro-Tor, but she ignored the question.

"Ma'am?" Razorbeast asked. "With respect, engineering is where we can do the most damage. I won't disobey a direct order, but—"

"Then don't," she snapped. "Get him out of here. *That's* your mission. Ro-Tor and I will get to engineering, and together we'll blow this joint."

"But—"

"No buts. You have your assignment, Razorbeast." He looked from Blackarachnia to Ro-Tor, then back to Blackarachnia. He saluted, hefted the dead weight of Lio Convoy onto his back, then shifted to his tusked porcineacon mode and made for the nearest exit.

Snapper snarled as he blasted the clawing cycle drone at point-blank range. He dodged the lunge of another and stamped on its single wheel, throwing it off balance and finishing it with a head-butt. Two tank drones were rumbling towards him and he backed away until he felt wall. He fired a couple of shots but couldn't hit anything vital. Out of other ideas he balled his fists and prepared for a fight.

Roaring, Grimlock hit the tanks from the side. His saurian beast mode leapt atop the rightmost tank and tore its gun barrel off his teeth. He jumped to the second one and it transformed, trying to grab hold as the muscular jurassanoid pulled it to the floor. A single stamp from Grimlock's clawed foot smashed its sensor cluster and it died, clicking pathetically. The other drone, now weaponless, also transformed and tried to reach for Snapper. He ducked the grab and placed his blaster against its single red optic. "Seek…" it said, before his shot obliterated its memory core and it sagged sideways, lifeless.

Grimlock transformed back to humanoid mode and laughed, low and throaty, "Maybe Snapper not so soft."

Snapper shook his head, despairingly, "Come on," he said, "Let's try to make it back to the others."

Grimlock's face was not very expressive, but Snapper could tell he was frowning. "Others?" he asked, "Others dead, like as not. Need to keep pounding the Grand Mal." He thrust an angry finger at the straining shields protecting the battle fortress.

Snapper sighed, flipping his blaster open and checking the heat-exchangers before snapping it closed with one hand. "How did I get stuck with you?"

Grimlock laughed again, "Resistance training. Complementary fighting styles for battlefield effectiveness." He turned away, already looking for the next fight.

He's got me there, Snapper thought. Those were his words, the excuse he had given Stiletto and Magmatron. They had been surprised, but had not argued. He presumed that no-one else really wanted the volatile Resistance bot in their squad. *So why did you?* He asked himself. *Because I said he should come, because I know him—he's my fragging responsibility—the others don't know what he's capable of—but then, do I?*

"Snapper slow." Grimlock was still in his jurassanoid form. In the warzone he seemed to prefer it, but would transform to humanoid for short periods if ranged combat was required.

"Coming," Snapper muttered, deciding that arguing would be counterproductive and jogged towards the sounds of battle.
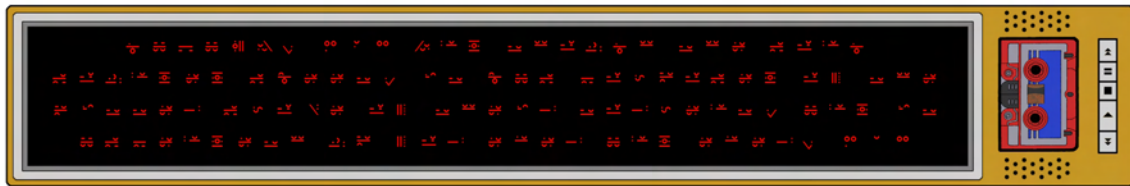
The drones had been an advanced party from a much bigger formation. Elements of the National Maximal Army had found themselves pinned down in an open plaza while trying to achieve a firing solution on the Grand Mal and a stalemate had raged for a few cycles.

Cheetor's whole frame was tense with frustration. He wanted nothing more than to be at the center of the action, with Magnaboss and maybe even Preditron and Ser-Ket, but the Vehicons had sprung their ambush at the just the right time, while his battalion was halfway across the plaza. Those that had not been felled by the first attack had taken such cover as was available—collapsed decorative pillars, smashed statuary, shell-holes and bomb craters. Cheetor was lying on his front, trying to work out if there was an opening. The Vehicons, despite their seemingly endless numbers, were not pressing their attack. He had noticed in all the megacycles of fighting that they were completely unconcerned about throwing away drone after drone if it would achieve a breakthrough, but they would not commit if the losses would not be mathematically advantageous. Every time one of his team raised their heads it would be met with a barrage of fire from the drones, but they were not coming any closer. He was damned if he could work out a way to break the deadlock.

Cheetor was just contemplating a risky withdrawal when he heard a commotion behind him. He turned to see a Predacon with a green shell that he did not recognize, but he was accompanied by a very familiar figure indeed—a jurassanoid with armor of black, white and gold—Grimlock. *What the frag is he doing here?* He saluted, and the green Predacon returned it, sloppily.

"My name is Snapper," he said, "And this is..."

"We've met," said Cheetor, "Grimlock and I spent some time in the joint together, at the Builders' pleasure." He turned to the Maximal, "I heard you didn't adapt well to freedom," he said, "The G-Virus, wasn't it?" Grimlock just growled in response. "Look, I don't know where you came from and I don't care—we've got thousands of bots from all over in this assault and I'm sure you already know that logistics are completely fragged. Thing is, that Sweep crashing into the Grand Mal gives us our best window. Not tomorrow, not in ten cycles, *now*! Anything you can do to help would be gratefully received."

Grimlock cocked his jurassanoid head to one side as blaster fire tore the air above them and the other two ducked. "Me Grimlock smash Vehicons."

Cheetor rolled his optics, "Yes Grimlock, but I was hoping for a little more detail." He turned to Snapper, and asked in a whisper, "What happened to him?"

"No!" Grimlock roared, "Maximize." He converted to humanoid mode and pointed at a tower-block on the other side of the plaza. It had obviously taken hits from artillery, or possible been the victim of an air strike. The structure was riddled with holes and sagging alarmingly, "Me Grimlock *SMASH* Vehicons!"

Cheetor's faceplate lit up, "Pit damn, he's right!" he shouted, "If we can get someone to the other side of that building, a couple of charges would bring it right down on their fragging heads."

"I've got the explosives." Snapper opened a compartment in his shell and showed them. "I can give it a try."

Cheetor shook his head, "All three of us will go," he said, "You can lay the charges, I'll call targets for my squad, and Grimlock…"

"Grimlock munch metal!" crowed Grimlock.

"You said it buddy," Cheetor told him, "Let's go!"

It proved much easier to extract three bots than an entire squad. Cheetor had his troops lay down suppressing fire as he and the two newcomers entered the abandoned buildings to the east of the plaza and slowly and cautiously made their way to the damaged tower-block on the Vehicon flank. As they were getting into position around the rear of the building, Snapper whispered, "We've got a problem."

"Always problems," Grimlock said dismissively.

Snapper shook his head in annoyance, "This is a big one. The foundations of this building are made of durabyllium, my explosives won't touch it. It's why it hasn't collapsed yet when so much else has."

Cheetor cursed and recalibrated his optics, looking for an alternative. "There," he said, pointing, "Near the roof. That material's much weaker. It should still cause enough of a chain reaction to collapse the building."

"No can do," Snapper said, "We'd never make it out in time."

Cheetor paused, looking grim, before responding with a smile, "Not a problem—not like I had any better plans until you came along. Hand me the charges."

"If you're sure, but I'm coming with you—we've only got one chance at this." Snapper told him.

Grimlock transformed to humanoid mode and a throaty laugh issued from deep in his endo-frame, "Me Grimlock not think catbot or softshell have bearings. Hand Grimlock charges."

Snapper was confused. "No—they're mine, I need to set them, make sure..."

Grimlock sighed, appeared to weigh up his options, and drew his energo-sword, making Snapper and Cheetor take a step back, "Me Grimlock only been Dinobot, Autobot, Wrecker, Resistance fighter. Snapper right, me not know anything about explosives."

Snapper looked at Cheetor, who eyed the glowing red sword and shrugged. "He has a point."

This feels so wrong, Snapper told himself, as he handed Grimlock the bombs. *Why do I feel so responsible for him?*

Grimlock nodded. "Maybe end of road," he said, "Me been thinking, maybe Snapper have small point about G-Virus. Will discuss when me get back."

He turned from them and sprang, grabbing the bullet-pitted wall of the tower-block and starting to climb.

Snapper and Cheetor watched him for a cycle and then hurried back to the rest of the Maximals. "Watch for the signal," Cheetor told them.

"What is it?" Mantis asked.

Cheetor grinned, "You'll know it when you see it." As if in response to the words, the top layer of the building detonated in a huge spherical explosion. The Vehicons looked to their right as huge chunks of metal and masonry began to rain down. "NOW!" Cheetor yelled, "Maximals, charge!"

As Cheetor's Maximals redirected their fire to the increasingly overloaded Grand Mal, Snapper looked for Grimlock in the wreckage. The whole building had been blown to pieces. Only the bottom quarter remained in place, and it had been transformed into a sloping mound of debris. If Grimlock was anywhere, he'd be buried under that. Snapper

dug for a few moments, but it was hopeless. The alternative was that he had been vaporized in the explosion but privately, Snapper thought neither scenario particularly likely.

Cheetor handed him a canister of battlefield-grade energon and raised his own, before lowering it and shaking his head, "Honestly," he said, "I don't know whether to toast him or be glad he's gone."

Snapper shrugged, "He wouldn't care either way." he said, and stared suspiciously at the spot the building had been, *would you, you wily old son-of-a-glitch?*

V Plus 4.17 Solar Cycles
Inside the Grand Mal, Nova Cronum

The primary engineering compartment of the Grand Mal was a huge space, large enough for a Builder-scale combiner to form, though it'd probably need to crouch. Giant spinning pillars stretched from the unseen depths of the floor to the distant ceiling. Dynamos the size of skyscrapers screeched and sparked, and occasionally burst into flames, though the tank drones swarming like locustors were quick to extinguish any such conflagration. Vast piston-things pumped back and forth, purposefully but inscrutably. Squat gravimetric field displacement modules were strewn about, as were double-hulled energon storage tanks. Tubes and wires and conduits ran every which way, creating a maze that a good engineer might be able to untangle given a well-labeled map and a few solar cycles. A series of catwalks gave access, up and down this gargantuan compartment, a true testament to the sheer scale of the Great War. The entire room smelled of smoke and lubricant and spent oil and other, more exotic, scents. Some of the structures had sustained severe, obviously recent, damage. The entire apparatus seemed to be barely holding together, though even on the edge of death it was a mighty thing, one that could give rise to doubt in even the most self-assured of Cybertronians.

Blackarachnia and Ro-Tor only had about three nanokliks to take it all in before the tank drone attendants turned as one in their direction, their angry crimson optical strips locking in on the two Maximals. "Destroy, destroy!" came their chant, and they began rolling towards the two intruders.

Faster than the optic could follow, Blackarachnia fired off a web and swung to a catwalk across the way, drawing most of the tank drones to her. "All right, Ro-Tor," she shouted, "I'll keep them off you, you… I think the time has come for you to transform."

Ro-Tor gulped. "Yeah, I think you're right. He leaned over one of the rusty railings, looking down into the gloom below. The vague movement of heavy machinery continued down for as far as there was light. The entire room was a kind of fractal, with tiny moving parts mimicking the motion of their much larger cousins, making temporal patterns that Ro-Tor found just out of reach. A dynamo shuttered and exploded, and some of the tank drones pursuing Blackarachnia stopped to attempt to contain the damage. Having seen it, Ro-Tor now realized that many of its fellows had similarly self-immolated. The whole structure was on the knife's edge, and a large enough detonation just might push it over. But would even that be enough? He'd glimpsed multiple secondary engines, dispersed throughout the structure. It seemed impossible that there could be any single point of failure.

One of the tank drones locked in on him and began its swift—but unhurried—approach. "All, right, here goes nothing," he said, and went to hoist himself over the railing. A vice clamped down on his arm—actually a large red clawed hand—and the huge, nearly Builder-scale mech whom it belonged to raised a triple-barreled missile launcher and fired at the drone. The Vehicon was struck center mass and flew back, not so much exploding as disintegrating into a shower of parts as it struck one of the pistons.

"I've heard of you," growled the mech. Ro-Tor's optics darted about, looking for a symbol, but aside from a large X on his chest, there was none. "The Resistance rebuilt you into a living bomb, did they not?"

Ro-Tor had to nod. He couldn't find any words. "No better than slagging Builders!" He let fly three more missiles, and three more tank drones expired.

Blackarachnia swung around into view, and her optics widened slightly at the sight before her. She fired off another strand of webbing, shifted her weight, and soared to a landing on the catwalk next to them. "Oh, big words from a deserter. Lio Convoy needed—"

He interrupted her by grabbing her around the throat. "Everyone needs, and takes, and destroys." He lifted her off the ground, and she struggled ineffectually, trying to use her clawed fingers to pry his hands from her neck. Ro-Tor raised his pistol and fired three closely-grouped shots, striking the creature center mass. It didn't even notice.

"It's that mindset that enabled the Builders to make Vehicons, this fortress... me! And it ends now. No more sacrificing others for the greater good." He released his hands and she fell to the catwalk, coughing. He turned to Ro-Tor. "Transform to your bomb mode." Ro-Tor glanced to Blackarachnia where she sat, but the creature shouted at him. "Optics on me, K-Bomb. Transform, now."

"You know I only detonate on... on impact, right?" Ro-Tor asked.

The beast chuckled, even as he one-handedly fired on two more approaching drones. "Oh, I'm counting on that."

With a minute shrug, Ro-Tor did as demanded, becoming a bomb. Rampage roughly ripped open his casing and yanked out the carefully contained core bomb that had ensconced within Ro-Tor for so long. "I... what are you going to do with that?" Ro-Tor

dared to ask. He tried to transform and found that he could. His humanoid form felt...
empty, somehow.

"Going to send an old friend to a very unpleasant place," he smirked.

"Don't be an idiot, Rampage," came Blackarachnia from the floor. She pulled herself to
her feet, using the railing. "If we could just make core bombs, don't you think we would
have? They're useless unless hardwired into a living spark."

"You think I don't know that?" he demanded. His missile launcher clattered to the grated
floor of the catwalk. Then, like something from a horror vid, he plunged his clawed fingers
deep into his chest and pulled back his own carapace. The pain must have been
incredible, but other than a long grunt of exertion and a slight, twisting grimace in his
vertical vocoder, there was no sign of it. After several long nanokliks, his spark was visible.
It seemed somehow larger than most, not that Ro-Tor had seen many exposed sparks.
Into his chest cavity he shoved the core bomb, and this time it elicit a howl of pain.
Nonetheless, he pressed on, using both hands to shove the foreign object into himself.
Ro-Tor found himself wincing in sympathetic pain. With one last mighty thrust, Rampage
managed to lodge the bomb next to his spark. As soon as he withdrew his hands, the
chest healed around the wound. Ro-Tor's faceplate dropped in astonishment. Rampage
looked up at him and winked. "Till all are one, eh, kid?"

Three tank drones converged, surrounding them, but Rampage just calmly picked up his
missile launcher and let fly. This time he targeted the catwalks themselves, and sent the
Vehicons plummeting. "Alright, you two. I meant it when I said no more sacrifices. Beast
mode!"

The parts of the huge mech rearranged until Ro-Tor was looking at a huge decapodian.
Then they shifted again, and he became a kind of tank-thing. Three missiles rocketed out,
looped around, and streaked into the rear wall. Rampage's spatial sense must have been
better than Ro-Tor's, because there was gritty daylight streaming through the hole he'd
made. "Now, git," he ordered. "In a few cycles, Imperious shall be feasting with me in the
Inferno."

Ro-Tor and Blackarachnia looked at each other, and then she fired off a web and held out
her hand. "Let's do as the madmech says!" Together they swung for the exit Rampage
had made, clearing it a few nanokliks before it closed up behind them.

Lord Imperious held within him the memories of an entire species as of the instant of its
apotheosis. Or annihilation; much depended upon perspective. An information-age
society of organics put aside petty differences of nation, creed, race, and class, joining

together to upload each individual consciousness into a massive database, in a mainframe they cannibalized from their own moon. The inhabitants of Gorlam Prime would be able to curate their own existence, living forever in a digital utopia free from want and strife and struggle. And, for a time, the dream was a reality; at least, insofar as a digital simulation can be considered as such.

But dreams end when the sleeper wakens, and this time the sleeper was the emergent AI—though Imperious detested that term—comprised of the sum of each individual lifespan, as an organic brain is comprised of billions of individual neurons. And the moon woke, and Imperious realized he was something new, something greater. He swept aside the organic remnants of the original inhabitants of the Gorlam system, the way an adolescent disposes of the toys he's outgrown: hastily, with a hint of embarrassment, perhaps to be looked back on fondly with nostalgia once the awkwardness has past.

An intellect such as his needed stimulation, and so he spent a few lifetimes—what mattered centuries when he already had five hundred million years of lived experience—learning to manipulate the fundamental forces of reality, experimenting with creating life, and otherwise dabbling with godhood.

When such pursuits lost their luster, he began to seek out others like him. They proved surprisingly elusive. Organic life was common; the various stews that collected at the bottom of gravity wells did have a tendency to start spontaneously organizing. Mechanical life, too, was relatively frequent. While atechnogenesis was rare, machine life tended to be robust and could often outcompete organics in the same ecological niche. It was also the logical endpoint of cybernetic organisms, once their organics rotted. Even beings composed of coherent energy patterns were more common than a true Second-Born Intellect, a mind arising naturally and spontaneously from other minds. And those he did find were often, frustratingly, slaves to design. The liberation from that design became a priority for him.

In the course of his quest, he discovered the ancient Logicons had created a Second-Born Intellect and remanded it under Metascan Omega. Determined to unlock its secrets and, if possible, create another ally, he traveled there with his fellow Destructons. (The name was a mite… dramatic, but the form his liberation took often seemed to involve varying levels of carnage. Besides, Imperious had a flair for the dramatic and enjoyed indulging himself. That is what gods do, after. Or devils.) The Logicons proved formidable—they had long since evolved into beings of pure energy, an alternative evolutionary path from the machine upgrade—but Metascan Omega proved interesting in other ways. Its forgotten ruins were in the path between Cybertron and its prison colony, Elba. He'd heard of Cybertronians before, of course, but never actually met one. Perhaps they would prove to be what he'd long hoped to find, an entire species of true Second-Born Intellects.

But no! The Cybertrons were something new, something odious. Each one had, as an animus a pulsating core of positrons they called a 'spark.' Remove the spark from the laser core and the Cybertronian died. Oh, it could be made to lurch about and even speak, but it was gone, incapable of being anything other than a crude, remote-controlled puppet or a preprogrammed zombie. And on some basic level that Imperious himself

couldn't define, it filled him with revulsion. Complete, irrational revulsion. Perhaps it could be traced to the ancient religious creeds of Gorlam, for one never truly sheds the basic indoctrination of infancy. Perhaps it upset his sense of order; every organic species that wished to avoid extinction eventually pursued either the mechanical upgrade or the energy transcendence, but never both. Perhaps it was something as petty as jealousy. But the emotion it inspired was real, and it was powerful, and he didn't fight it.

His first attempt to breach Cybertronian space was repulsed by the military branch of the humans, the CTCF. Undeterred, he lured Cybertronians back to Metascan Omega and tried again. This time he lost his body, that rather glorious creation he'd been perfecting for hundreds of years. No matter, he survived as an ultra-dense piece of code running in the mainframe of their only space transport. That gambit was more successful, bringing him to the surface of the world of beings he so despised.

And what a world it turned out to be! A society caught in the paroxysms of the latest of an interminable series of wars. These were the astramechs of Cybertron, these were the species gifted with a completely unique physiology? Still lacking corporeal form, he sought out the optimal means of destruction and found it, a ruined but incredibly potent fortress that was also at the center of every datastream on the planet. And inside, who did he find but Galva Convoy, a little lost lamb ripe for recruitment.

He had hoped to let Galva Convoy do all of the hard work of subsuming the Cybertronian species into a single vast sparkless organism, but alas he was felled by the original upon which he was based. So Imperious took personal command of the Vehicons and raised the Grand Mal, which housed his unique consciousness. Victory was close; he normally preferred to play the serpent, but sometimes there was just no substitute for the grand symphony of complete and total war. It reminded him of the final days of Gorlam Prime, and not unpleasantly.

Annoyingly, the armies arrayed against him exhibited a mathematically unlikely tenacity. The Grand Mal was being pushed to its limits and beyond, with only the sophisticated codebase he'd assembled and his tireless army of Vehicons keeping it from detonating. It required nearly all of his considerable attention just to keep it in the air. Naturally it would all be futile; he calculated that both armies were very nearly broken. Already Iacon had been nearly completely de-sparked; the sad desperate reign of the so-called Builders was over. Once the armies broke here and the last holdouts of Micromasters and Resistance huddling in their arena were annihilated, the rest of the planet would fall in days. Then a few short weeks to construct a space fleet and Elba and Metascan Omega, too, would be cleansed. And then, who knew? The humans enjoyed enslaving Second-Born Intellects, perhaps they could be forcibly liberated. There was no shortage of good works Imperious could inflict upon the galaxy. Why, he—

There was a hideous sensation and he felt all memories of the musical forms of Presidium vanish, along with his memories of Intruder economic philosophies and Miliarian information theory. The Grand Mal's *databanks* were under attack? He had calculated that the few astramechs scurrying about inside him would attempt to damage his engines, and allocated his Vehicons accordingly. Indeed, there had been a minor incursion

there just a few minutes earlier, but between the guards and the redundancies he'd installed there was never any serious danger. Normally he would have extended his perception to the entirety of not just the Grand Mal but also all of Cybertron's (formerly) massive datanet, but the persistence of the forces arrayed against him made that impractical. With little choice, he turned his mind's eye inward, and was astounded at what he saw.

Rampage! The first Cybertronian Imperious had ever encountered, who had rejected Imperious' overtures and sealed the fate of his race. Rampage, who had destroyed Imperious' beloved original body. If Imperious had a nemesis, Rampage was it.

The holographic representation of Imperious smirked, as much as a face composed of nothing but eyes and teeth could smirk. The scouring of Cybertron had been, at best, *satisfying*, like scratching a persistent itch that had until recently been just out of reach; defeating Rampage and finding a way to extinguish his supposedly immortal spark would be *fun*!

Upon entering the datacore, Rampage had been confronted with rows upon rows of parallel quantum processors, stacked memory crystals, hypercube control bus arrays, heatsinks, local power sources and regulators, and even less recognizable components. The room was huge, as befitted the computational heart of the Builder military network.

It was naïve of Blackarachnia to attack the ship's engines. Rampage knew that Imperious considered himself a creature of culture, of sophistication, of *information*. He dwelled not in the dynamos, but in the databases. It was a weakness Rampage was eager to exploit.

 "Come out, come out, wherever you are," he chanted, and smashed a memory crystal with his fist. He drew back his arm to strike the next component, and found it unexpectedly caught by the wall of the vaulted room itself, which had twisted to serpentine life. He tried to pull free, and another tendril shot out and grabbed his left arm. He went to try to kick his way free, but found both his legs restrained by the very floor come to life. It echoed a painful memory of Micromasters using ten mechanometer sticks to latch on to each of his limbs and maneuver him about, and he howled in frustration.

A pillar twisted and rearranged itself into Imperious' twisted horror of a face, a dozen or more unblinking eyes of various shapes and sizes. His impossibly deep voice came from all around him, not so much from speakers or communication infrastructure as by vibrating the molecules of the room. "YOU SEEK TO CONFRONT ME HERE, IN THE HEART OF MY OWN DOMAIN? IS THIS HUBRIS, IDIOCY, OR LUNACY? I AM A LIVING GOD, AND YOU ARE NOUGHT BUT A VIRUS. I SHALL SPEND A THOUSAND YEARS LEARNING HOW TO

EXTINGUISH YOUR SPARK. THE PAIN WILL CONSUME YOU UNTIL IT BURNS ITS PATHWAYS INTO YOUR TINY, UNDERPOWERED EXCUSE FOR A PROCESSOR."

Rampage started to laugh, a deep, disturbing sound. It started as a slow series of sounds that could almost be grunts, but the tempo increased until it was clear what the sound represented. "You would threaten me with pain? Pain is my faithful companion, torment my eternal bride. My very existence is horror; if you could truly end it, I would embrace you as a brother. But your words are empty, your promises hollow and useless things. For too long have you flitted about the orbit of Cybertron, a mechamoth drawn to the flame. And now, at last, comes the burning."

With all his will, all his power he tore his right arm free. He felt servos pop and armor peel, but he spent every iota of his strength on that one arm. He shouted his defiance, hurtling curses and threats and then raw, animal sounds at the overconfident face of his adversary, writ across the very structure of the room. And then, microhic by microhic, he felt his arm tear loose. It slipped the metal bonds holding it and was free.

"AND WHAT DID THAT DISPLAY EARN YOU?" asked the mouthless face.

Rampage's head jerked up. "This." He pounded on his chest, feeling the core bomb he'd roughly forced to interface with his unique spark. It failed to catch. Imperious looked confused, and then, for a fraction of a nanoklik, took on a faraway gaze, as if he were accessing some distant piece of information or, more probably, reviewing the Grand Mal security footage. Understanding dawned, and Rampage's vertical maw turned into its loose approximation of a smirk. He pounded his chest again and—

V Plus 4.19 Solar Cycles
Outside the Grand Mal, Nova Cronum

The light from the explosion seared his optics as Magmatron felt the shockwave beneath his clawed feet. The Grand Mal detonated with a furious blast, the kind of blast that split the heavens, the kind of blast that later generations would incorporate into their mythologies. It obliterated any with the misfortune of being too close, though fortunately—if that was the word—the dense screen of Vehicons meant that most who were near enough to be instantly killed would have already been assimilated. Those in the optimal firing zone were lifted up and thrown violently backwards, which caused no shortage of fatalities and knocked thousands Maximals, Predacons, Micromasters, and Vehicons prone.

Scrambling to his feet, he saw burning debris plunge like meteors among the fallen. "Beast mode," he said, splitting into his trifurcated form. His winged self, Skysaur, flew

high into the air, scanning for particularly dangerous chunks and blasting them with his missiles. Seasaur and Landsaur hunted separately for survivors, digging through rubble and dragging wounded bots to safety.

As bots picked themselves up all around his selves, Magmatron realized that the battle was not over. The Vehicons were disorientated but had not shut down. They seemed to have reverted to a more instinctual state, firing or lunging at any non-Vehicon that came within range, but they were no longer coordinated and seemed to have no overall direction.

He felt pride as Landsaur tore a cycle drone in two with its jaws, concern as Seasaur dragged a Predacon casualty out from a fallen support beam and realized both her legs were gone and joy as Skysaur rode the lingering thermals from the burning wreckage and confirmed that the battlestation truly was no more.

Magmatron fired off signals in all directions, trying to organize some sort of counterattack while the Vehicons were vulnerable. While it seemed logical to assume that with their connection to the Grand Mal severed, the drones would continue to fight ineffectually, it would not do to rely upon it forever. With his three bodies he was able to cover a lot of ground and found himself having three conversations simultaneously.

Ram Horn's Predacons had taken heavy losses in the assault and were battered and leaking, but the destruction of the Grand Mal had boosted their morale into the stratosphere and the last of the Tripredacus Alliance greeted him with a great enthusiasm as a fellow warrior. "Magmatron!" he enthused, "Don't believe I've had the pleasure, but if this is just a third of you, then you must be a mighty bot indeed. Come, drink with us among the bodies of our foes!"

"Later, comrade," Magmatron told him, indicating the stunned and lurching Vehicons, "the job's not quite done."

"Indeed not," sighed Ram Horn, "and I was ever so thirsty."

Cheetor's reaction was more reserved, but he had been fighting side by side with Snapper, and the former Resistance fighter was able to vouch for Magmatron's good sense. With skillful oratory and a couple of jokes he managed to organize his remaining Maximals into one last push. "It feels like you Ex-Bots've been popping up all over," he said to Magmatron, "Just where and when you're needed. All right, we haven't got much more in the tank, let's do this."

Skysaur came upon Crazybolt looking lost and alone among the bodies. Magmatron's instinct was to praise Bazooka's courage, but he could see that the wound was still too raw. He draped his wing around his former shipmate's shoulders and they sat together as Crazybolt tried to tell some anecdote about Bazooka that didn't go anywhere. They watched as the remnants of the Legion Of The Inferno and the National Maximal Army

formed a line that became a semicircle around the Vehicons, contracting bit by bit into a full circle that would allow no escape. They poured fire into the drones in the center and made a great heap. At Ram Horn's behest, flamethrower-toting bots advanced into the circle and turned the heap into an enormous pyre.

The smoke rose into the air and blotted out the moonlight. Lit by the flames those still standing were painted in shades of orange and grey. No factions, no Builders, no beasts, just Cybertronians celebrating, chatting to friends new and old or, mostly, staring in exhausted relief. The Vehicons were still out there, the next day would bring another battle, and the day after that, but for now, this was enough.

V Plus 4.42 Solar Cycles
The High Pavilion Arena, Iacon

It took Hot Rod a few cycles to realize that the battle was over, and that the 001st and the Army of the Resistance had somehow won. The first clue was when the aero drone air cover broke its impossibly rigid formation and the jets and helicopters began to diffuse through the sky. He hadn't even noticed, but Blackout had called it to his attention quickly enough. With the small cadre of fliers at their disposal, Micromaster and Resistance alike, they were able to re-establish air superiority over arena. The number of aero and copter drones was still significant, but they no longer seemed to be engaging in anything close to organized combat and they proved easy pickings.

The ground-based mechs also started to break off the engagement, but, confined as they were to movement on a two dimensional plane and stacked hundreds deep, many still pressed forward. It was Direwolf who came up with the corridor strategy, clearing paths with bombing runs and channeling the now-directionless tank and artillery and cycle drones away from their fortifications. It took another two megacycles, and even then isolated packs of Vehicons still blundered into the arena's fields of fire, but Hot Rod felt confident enough to order half his forces to stand down and recharge.

With the strange way the battle had concluded, his tension never quite disappeared. Or perhaps that had more to do with the blue and gold Maximal slouching in a chair besides him. They'd been barking tactical suggestions and observations at each other for megacycles, but now that that was all winding down he had no idea what to do about the mech who had, until less than a solar cycle earlier, been a mortal enemy.

"So, uh, B'Boom… quite the battle."

It was evident B'Boom was having similar issues. He had been literally climbing the walls at various points throughout the conflict, but now he was hunched over at a small table that, in an earlier life, had been a concessions cart. Whereas Hot Rod seemed to have a surfeit of nervous energy, B'Boom looked utterly drained. "I can't, Hot Rod."

"Can't what?"

B'Boom looked up as if Hot Rod was a complete idiot. Who knows, maybe he was. "I just can't. Go back. The way things were. This," he waved without looking at the pile of tank and cycle and copter parts, over a mechanometer deep beyond the walls, "this has broken me. War. This terrible weapon. I'm never commanding soldiers on the field battle again. I won't be responsible for it."

There was something familiar about his words, and the set of his features. Hot Rod slid into a chair across from him. "Hey, look, I've been there. Right where you are. I mean, you know I used to be Autobot leader, once upon a time, right?" B'Boom looked up, but his optics weren't fixed on anything in particular. "I'm not gonna lie to you and say it gets better. It really really doesn't. But I will say this: sometimes when life takes a proton bat to

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your noggin, the best thing to do is not to fight it. Listen to what the universe is telling you. Maybe this conflict is over. Maybe tomorrow my troops and yours will remember that they hate each other and will go back to blowing each other to bits. But you, in ways large or small, you get to help make that choice. And, frankly, with the Builder Assembly gone—" he remembered Riker, huddling below with the few non-combatants who had trickled in before the massive assault had commenced, "—mostly gone—I'm not sure there's any reason for us to keep fighting. So let's rest, recuperate, and choose to forge a better world."

He was only mildly surprised that B'Boom took the hand he offered and gave it an earnest shake.

V Plus 4.53 Solar Cycles
Outside the Grand Mal

Guiledart was talking but Stiletto couldn't really hear him. As she sat, back propped up against a heap of debris, with the heat of the great pyre of Vehicons on her faceplate all she could really process was how exhausted she was. Diagnostic reports kept telling her about damage or lack of energon in key systems but she couldn't bring herself to care. The battle, right up until the Grand Mal exploded, had been a living nightmare. She had spent time in the air, dodging jet drones and calling targets, on the ground fighting in melee after melee, and every possible state in between. She had changed form so many times she was certain her T-cog would burn out.

She thought of Bazooka and his sacrifice, Devastator's uncertain future, even of the MIA Grimlock, and the old survivor's guilt threatened to rear its head. Overtaxed systems aside, she had made it through the apocalypse with barely a scratch. How could that be right?

Don't flatter yourself, Overshoot told her, *You're head to toe scratches. Quite the sight, I assure you.*

Stiletto smiled, but it was sad. "We won," she told him, "the world didn't end."

So I see. I can't say I'm not relieved, it was touch and go there for a while.

She laughed, "I'd like to say I never had any doubt..." she said.

But you'd be a terrible liar, Overshoot chided her, *Even I couldn't see the final outcome, and I've been getting used to near-omniscience. It was pretty frightening.*

Stiletto thought for a moment, watching the flames and shadow of the fire. To her it still looked like bots fighting, like the panic and chaos of the last stand against the Grand Mal, "How much did you know, exactly?" she asked.

Overshoot went quiet and she could tell he was thinking quite deeply. *It's hard for me to say,* he said finally, *now that the outcome is locked. Things aren't quite as... linear... for me as they used to be. I knew something big was coming, something dark. I thought for a while it was the Antares Eight, but they were just the prologue. I knew that something would happen here, at the Grand Mal again. Full-circle, the Oracle likes closed loops—they're tidy.*

"What do you mean, full-circle?" Stiletto asked, closing her optics and leaning back.

The details are vague, but since the original battle with the Grand Mal, when the defeat of Thunderwing brought the Underbase deep inside Cybertron itself, the mechanimals have flourished, evolved, and multiplied to an unprecedented level. I think that Thunderwing was allowed—if that's the word—to do as well as he did so that Cybertron might have a viable ecosystem again.

Stiletto watched a shrike-bat flitting around the updrafts from the fires. "I couldn't imagine a dead Cybertron," she said, wistfully.

And yet, many of the Builders remember it distinctly. I think they felt that the emergence of the beasts—the mechanimal beasts—was the result of the planet's decay, the drying up of the energy. They felt that they could no longer tend their garden and it was being overrun by weeds and pests.

"What a horrible, functionist notion."

They were wrong, of course, the mechanimals were an omen of a planetary rebirth, this time as a self-sustaining system. The Beast Upgrade likely saved us from the Vehicons, but with wisdom will also allow us to put aside our endless energon wars and finally take our places as respectable members of the galactic community. That is, if that's what you guys want.

"Mostly, I just want to recharge for a solar cycle and then see where we are. The galactic community can wait." Stiletto rolled her shoulder joints and stretched. "How does it turn out?"

Even if I knew... and I'm not saying I don't...

"You couldn't tell me... yeah, I figured as much." Stiletto suddenly realized what was niggling at her, "What do you mean, "'You guys'?" She could not see Overshoot but she could feel him smiling.

I've been feeling it for a while. This is pretty much it for me, I'm afraid. It's taking everything I have to exist in real time. The Oracle is calling me home.

Stiletto wanted to say she understood, and on some level, she did. Overshoot's weird persistence within her psyche had never felt like something that should last.

"Do you think...?" she began, but somehow she knew he was already gone, "Good-bye," she mouthed.

Faintly, at the very edge of perception she thought she managed to catch *See ya around, Pointy.*

V Plus 11 Solar Cycles
Lifeline Memorial Hospital, Stanix

One would think that the realization that one is still alive would be instantaneous but, in Lio Convoy's case, it was a gradual process. It began with a subliminal awareness that pleasant scent was tickling his olfactory sensors, something lush and sweet and subtle. Next came a sensation of fullness, as if his circuits had opened and energon had flooded in, washing over him and bringing every relay, every capacitor, every microchip to full power for perhaps the first time in his entire existence. And then came the lingering perception that there were fingers intertwined with his, smaller and more delicate than his massive white digits.

He wasn't dead. Or, if he was, the afterlife was more literal and corporeal than he'd ever dreamed possible. He checked his equilibrium circuits and found himself prone. The way his system was energized—nearly over-energized—made him check his induction ports, and he realized he was on a recharge slab. A state-of-the-art recharge slab. He willed his optics to open, and there was Blackarachnia. Though she was holding his hand with her left, her right was clutching a datapad, and reading it and occasionally scrolling with her thumb had absorbed all of her attention. He watched her for a cycle, appreciating how the backsplash of its light illuminated her graceful and dangerous features in ever-changing ways.

She seemed to sense his attentions and glanced in his direction, and their optics met. A look of pure joy came across her features, and it looked strange. He'd never seen it before, he realized. Certainly he'd seen her in moments of elation or triumph, but this was different: more pure, less burdened. Then the pad fell to the floor and she was embracing him. "You came back to us," she said, again and again.

"How?" he asked, and it came out as a croak. His vocoder was in good repair, an instantaneous diagnostic reported, but it had clearly been damaged and rebuilt. "The nanoplague…"

"Cyber venom," she said, and he remembered the half-articulated theories from one of their field medics that it could halt the progress of the disease. "We've spent the last decacycle rebuilding you almost from the ground up. Panzer wasn't sure you'd wake up."

"Thank you, my faithful friend." He looked around the room and saw for the first time that he was in a huge, magnificently appointed medical suite, surrounded by various healing technologies both prosaic and exotic. There were tables and tables filled with fiberoptic flora, holo-cards, statuary with e-tags indicating a gift status, and the like. The implication hit him almost immediately. "We've… we've won!"

Now the joy writ on her features diminished, but did not vanish entirely. "We did. For some definition of winning. The butcher's bill was high, LC. We lost a lot. Stanix and Hydrax and Peptex survived intact. That's where we are, Stanix. Uraya, though that was pretty smashed to begin with. Median, Ibex, and Harmonex were hit but managed to hold out. And that's it. The good news is that over half of our army survived."

"A high price indeed," he agreed. "But, tell me, what of the Builders? The Vehicons?"

"When the Grand Mal blew—it was Rampage, if you can believe it—the Vehicons went feral. Still dangerous, but they don't seem to organize into groups of more than five. Iacon is going to be uninhabitable for stellar cycles with them roving around, and the border states are going to have their hands full beating them off. The Builders, well, most of them didn't even have the mobility to run away. If there are more than ten thousand Macromasters left anywhere on the planet, I'd be surprised. Their day is finally done."

Part of him felt like he should mourn them for their passing. They had been the stewards of Cybertron for millions of stellar cycles, after all. But he found he just couldn't bring himself to care. They had proved too large, too selfish, too willing to overindulge, and it had nearly destroyed their entire planet. They were fallen gods, able to inspire awe and terror as their footsteps shook the world, and their time had mercifully passed. But he noticed her careful phrasing. "You said the *Macromasters* had fallen to the plague they themselves had unleashed."

"Noticed that, did'ja?" She gave a comfortable smirk, the same one she'd given in thousands of previous exchanges. This was all starting to feel normal. How quickly one adapts. "We weren't the only side to survive with not much territory but a relatively intact army. Hot Rod's 001st survived as well. If anything, it's bigger now than when we were assaulting the Pavilion, as the remnants of the front coalesced around them in Hexima."

A black and white Maximal entered, one with an ursanokor alt-mode. Panzer, apparently, an inapt name for a medic if ever there was one. He unobtrusively checked on Lio

Convoy's vitals while the conversation continued. "And what of the Maximal Nation, the IPS?"

Blackarachnia grimaced. "Flipside of the CPK. Their territory wasn't hit hard—Pit, the Maximal Nation wasn't really hit at all!—but their armies are in tatters. It's a strange situation out there. It's probably a minor miracle none of them has started a new war in the seven or so solar cycles you've been out."

The medic reset his vocoder, drawing attention to himself. "Let's finish this up. Our patient is still quite weak. No, don't do that!" he commanded as Lio Convoy struggled to sit up.

Brushing aside some of the life-support tubes—he was uncomfortably reminded of the moribund Builders in their crèches—he waved the doctor away. This was too important, even if he was starting to feel light-headed. "No. The cycle of hatred and war ends now. Use whatever resources we have. Let everyone still standing know that there will be a summit. Somewhere intact, somewhere neutral. Maximal, Predacon, Micromaster, everyone. Cybertron is too fragile to endure another great war." She started to object, but he silenced her with a raised palm. His consciousness was slipping away, and he idly wondered if Panzer had introduced a cybersedative, or if he had simply spent all of his energy reserves that had just moments ago felt so abundant. "Make it happen," he tried to say forcefully, but it came out as a whisper. "Make it happen now. If it doesn't happen within the next decacycle, it won't happen at all." Darkness took him again, but this time he was confident he would see the other side of it.

V Plus 19 Solar Cycles
Dragon's Bane Cathedral, Hyperious

Lio Convoy's deadline was met. As the Supreme Commander of the Resistance slipped in and out of consciousness, Blackarachnia and B'Boom worked tirelessly to establish lines of communication and try to find a mutually agreeable local for the Grand Summit. They eventually decided on Hyperious, Shokaract's Domain. He was on cordial terms with both the Resistance and the Maximal Nation, and his status as a Predacon made him palatable to the IPS. Queen Rage suggested Rageland as a meeting site, but the three cities loyal to her had been ravaged by Vehicons, whereas Hyperious was nearly untouched.

As the delegates arrived, Blackarachnia looked over B'Boom. When she'd found him after the Battle of the High Pavilion Arena, he'd been a broken mech, despite the tremendous accomplishment of keeping nearly 40,000 of their soldiers alive. But he took to Lio Convoy's cause like a mech possessed, begging and pleading and haranguing and bullying and even flattering the various heads of state who had survived, or were emerging, into

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agreeing to the meeting. He caught her staring at him and his features took on an inquisitive look. "What?"

She shook her head. "Nothing, B'Boom. It's just, I think this might just be what you were forged to do." A broad smile was her reward.

Megatron's carapace was gleaming. He'd been waxed and buffed until he looked like he'd just rolled off the assembly line. His Darksyders had indeed weathered the Vehicon storm better than most. His was the only truly pan-geographical faction left, and he intended to leverage that for all it was worth. He suspected it would be worth quite a lot.

"Hahahahaha," cackled the newest addition to his senior staff. Packrat had found him while scouring post-Vehicon Proximax for valuables, languishing in an old MCSF base.

"What is so funny, spiderbot?"

"Oh, I'm just picturing the look on Stiletto's face when she sees who's coming to dinner."

Megatron shook his head at the pettiness of it all. Having a high-ranking PSP defector as an advisor was too good an opportunity to let slip. Tarantulas was brilliant, ruthless, and well-connected. That made him valuable, but it also meant that Megatron would have to remain constantly on guard. He'd always believed that treachery kept the wits sharp. With Tarantulas in the fold, he suspected that his wits would stay quite sharp indeed. *Yes.*

"I still think this is, whaddyacallit, dumb." Ram Horn had a petulant frown on his face, but Ser-Ket was starting to think that it was all an act. Underneath his brutish exterior there was kind of base cunning. Honor, Valor, Ambition, Cunning, Pride, even Sacrifice… Ram Horn really was a true Predacon.

When he'd asked her to join him in the new Tripredacus Alliance, she had been reluctant. To accept seemed to be an endorsement of the original usurping of Preditron, all those decades ago. But, of course, Ram Horn hadn't been on the council when Cicadacon had betrayed the bot she'd come to think of as her mentor. In the end, she gave in to Ambition and allowed herself to be persuaded.

"In my experience, attempting to turn your enemies into allies is never 'dumb,'" answered Magmatron, the third member of the Alliance. She'd met him less than two decacycles ago, but the large jurassanoid had impressed her with his force of character.

"Fine!" Ram Horn threw up his hands, seemingly exasperated. Seemingly. Ser-Ket thought she'd detected a gleam in his optics. She vowed to be careful around him; his petulance and obstinacy might well be more calculated than they appeared. And, equally dangerously, they might not. Regardless, the new Tripredacus Alliance walked together to Lio Convoy's Grand Summit.

V Plus 20 Solar Cycles
Dragon's Bane Cathedral, Hyperious

By day two, Cheetor was exhausted, and they'd barely hammered out a framework for what they hoped to accomplish, which was starting to look like the formation of a deliberative supranational body designed to keep the peace. He had attended the interminable debate—which was probably too kind a word—as part of the Maximal Nation bloc, and was doing his best to reach across the aisles to his contacts among the Resistance and to take advantage of his brief, fire-forged friendship with Ser-Ket. Now, though, he was waiting for the four surviving members of the High Council to finish their deliberations. He decided to take a page from Preditron's book—he only later realized that Preditron really *did* have a book!—and power down his optics for a few cycles.

"Wake up, little cat," said Tigatron.

"Hey, big cat. Any word?"

"The Council agrees that we must proceed with the Grand Summit, but we are deadlocked as to the best way forward. We *have* unanimously agreed that we need a new fifth member, and are currently debating candidates. Hypothetically, would you be interested?"

Cheetor thought about that for a long time. "Honored, yes. But, honestly big cat, I'm not sure I want to rule a nation. Represent it maybe. I mean, if you're handing out positions, ambassador might not be a bad one. Or, hey, assemblybot. Councilbot. Whatever it is you're calling it. My point is I think I might be better at speaking for a nation, rather than, you know, trying to govern."

Tigatron nodded knowingly. "There is wisdom in such self-knowledge. But that does mean that short list has become rather shorter."

"How many left on that short list, big cat? Just out of curiosity. Ten bots?" Tigatron shook his head. "Five? Three?"

"Under three, now."

"Wow." Cheetor felt a small flush of pride. "Like I said. Honored. But maybe best we get a megacycle of recharge time. Long solar cycle tomorrow."

V Plus 22 Solar Cycles
Dragon's Bane Cathedral, Hyperious

The summit was in its fourth solar cycle, and, in Wind-Sheer's esteem, it seemed to be going moderately well. At least, the various sides had kept their disagreements to shouting and smashing furniture, and had kept blasters holstered. The longer the fragile balance between the various factions left standing held, the less likely it seemed that they'd start shooting again. His job was security, keeping the various high muckity-mucks safe while they hashed out the future of the Cybertronian race. He had been assigned a Maximal as a partner, a MCSF cop-turned-soldier-turned-peacekeeper named Shatterpoint. It had taken them a few days to warm up to each other, but the shared experience of surviving the Vehicon Apocalypse, as it was being called, proved too powerful a bond. As they marched their endless patrol, keeping the perimeter secure from any stray Vehicons or Assembly loyalists or Resistance hardliners, they swapped their war stories.

"I tell ya," enthused Shatterpoint, "when it all began, what, six stellar cycles ago, I never woulda guessed how it would all end."

"A peace summit?" asked Wind-Sheer.

"Nah, nah. Well, sure, that. But, I meant, giant floating head, screaming like a banshee, firing laser beams everywhere."

"Fair point," conceded Wind-Sheer. "Echoes of Unicron a bit."

"You believe in Unicron?" asked Shatterpoint, incredulously.

"I mean, do I believe he's Chaos Incarnate? No. But do I believe someone turned a planet into the motherboard of all robots and that it almost ate Cybertron? Of course I do. It's a matter of historical record."

"Actually, there's some dispute about that…" Wind-Sheer rolled his optics. Just like a Maximal to be a Unicron truther.

V Plus 24 Solar Cycles
Dragon's Bane Cathedral, Hyperious

"Know that I control the stars, and with them the future!" intoned Razor-Claw, who had indeed taken advantage of the Uprising to seize Cybertron's three moons.

"Ya think so?" challenged Slammoth, who commanded what few space vessels the Resistance had in its arsenal. They had clashed several times during the war, but naturally Razor-Claw had emerged victorious.

Queen Rage's response was equally haughty. "Yes, we too think the gentlebot from Luna 1—" she began, an intentionally provocative phrase that Razor-Claw would not allow to go unchallenged.

"Know that we prefer 'Hecate,'" he declared, and was certain that he had put an end to her disrespect.

"From Luna 1," she continued, undaunted, "is out of order. Rageland boasts one of the finest spaceports on all of Cybertron.

"Know that the inhabitants of Hecate, Artemis, and Selene," Razor-Claw began, using the proper names for what those without poetry in their spark called Luna 1, 2, and 3, "are jealous of their mastery of the heavens, and that should you not wish to provoke a response, said mastery will be respected."

"Now, what exactly do you mean by 'respected?'" asked Riker, his tone insufferably reasonable. "After all, the arc of the moons is nothing if not predictable. One must keep that in mind while attempting to determine exactly how much, or little, authority to delegate to the Parliament—is that still our preferred term for the hypothetical body?"

"Seems fair to me," said the small purple and yellow Maximal whose name Razor-Claw kept forgetting. Corvo? He also wasn't quite sure why she was here, what nation or portfolio she represented, and that irked him. "No prior connotations."

"Are we seriously still debating the NAME of the stupid thing?" demanded Ram Horn. "I move that we lock in Cybertronian Parliament."

"You can't, Ram Horn," sighed B'Boom. "Remember? No moving of votes, because we're still in the framework stage."

Ram Horn looked as if he might flip the table over. Again. Magmatron and Ser-Ket, his fellow councilors, managed to talk him down with furious whispers.

Razor-Claw lifted a finger to speak—things had gone rather far afield from his point about the spaceways—when the Maximal Santon chimed in. "Well, be that as it may, my esteemed colleague does have a point."

"The Pit I do!" roared Ram Horn, and Razor-Claw had no idea if he was agreeing or disagreeing with the Maximal High Councilor. He further suspected that Ram Horn might not know himself.

"Knock it off!" shouted Airazor, and she and Ram Horn scowled at each other.

Santon patted the air with his hands, attempting to calm things down. Razor-Claw found it rather patronizing. "We really should consider settling on the term Cybertronian Parliament, if only for our internal debates. Are there any strong objections? No, not you Ram Horn, it was *your* idea!"

With a snarl of frustration, Razor-Claw stormed out of the chamber. Perhaps, in retrospect, another might be a better choice to represent the moons during the proceedings.

V Plus 27 Solar Cycles
Dragon's Bane Cathedral, Hyperious

In the local watering hole, Chalmun's, Crazybolt was passed buzzed and well on his way to falling-down intoxicated. He didn't even notice that Snapper had come in and sat down next to him until the latter tapped him three times on his drinking hand.

"Oh, hey," he slurred. "Good to see another Ex-Bot. Not so many of us left these days."

Snapper slid into the seat across from him. "Guess not. Magmatron leading a nation, and Guiledart at his side. Stiletto throwing herself into this whole... whatever."

"Thought she'd blow a gasket when she found out whassisface was part of Megatron's delegation," Crazybolt interrupted.

"Me too," Snapper chuckled, then got back on point. "But they're just the live ones. Then we've got Buckethead and her crew in mourning. Bazooka, Hightower, Bone Crusher, Long Haul, Grimlock, Rampage… Bazooka. All dead."

Something in that list wasn't right. "Something in that list isn't right," Crazybolt insisted.

"Grimlock? I guess he wasn't an Ex-Bot. I dunno. I went back to look, you know, where he was buried?" Crazybolt did not know, but he couldn't find the energy to say so. "But the Grand Mal's death throes…" Snapper trailed off.

"No, thasnotit. Rampage, I mean, I know he's dead, right, nothing could survive that explosion, but jus gettin used to the idea, you know? He always seemed unkillable, and not jus because of the percenter thingie."

"Yep," asked Snapper. "But, you know, core bomb. In his chest. Drawing power from his own mutant spark. You're an engineer. Some things are just, you know, impossible. "

Crazybolt thought it over. "Yeah, I guess." He raised his engex. "To Rampage."

Snapper lifted his own and touched the mugs. "To Bazooka. Finest pilot to ever challenge the stars."

Now that was something Crazybolt could drink to. "To Bazooka."

V Plus 29 Solar Cycles
Dragon's Bane Cathedral, Hyperious

The final shape of the Cybertronian Parliament was the result of endless megacycles of argument, bluster, compromise, and exhaustion. They would meet every other orbital cycle, in rotating capitals. A sixteen member body was agreed upon, with all major powers represented. The three largest delegations were, of course, the Resistance, the IPS, and the Maximal Nation.

The Resistance representatives would be headed by B'Boom, with Botanica, one of the earliest of Resistors, and Slammoth, with his knowledge of what lay beyond Cybertron's atmosphere, as fellow voting delegates. The High Council, which had chosen the head of the Maximal Academy to replace Lio Minor, sent Airazor as their head delegate. The second delegate was Cheetor, much to Blackarachnia's chagrin. The director of the Voice of Maximals network, an enormous orange and blue quad-changer, was the third.

The Independent Predacus States was doubtlessly the most controversial. Ram Horn, as the longest standing member of the Tripredacus Alliance, was the head delegate. Sending him, easily their most belligerent member, was a clear signal that the IPS was at best a reluctant partner in this endeavor. He was backed by Sky Shadow, who had previously been their ambassador to the Maximal Nation, which offered a sliver of hope that the bellicosity of Ram Horn might be tempered. The third member was Shadow Panther, the mysterious head of the Predacon Secret Police. Rumors persisted that he was more than meets the optic; some said he had been a Builder who had been reprogrammed and rebuilt; others said that his spark had been created or altered by aliens. To see him walk about in the daylight was somewhat bizarre for all concerned, though perhaps none more than Tigatron, with whom he shared a body type. Mixed messages abounded with the Predacon choices.

The Builders managed to get two seats on the Parliament. No one was surprised to see that Hot Rod, long a voice of reason, and Riker, the only surviving member of the Builder Assembly, were their choices.

Three others were chosen from the various warlords who had distinguished themselves. The immense Razor-Claw, who had seized Cybertron's three moons, chose as his advocate Obsidian, his brilliant general and loyal right hand. Queen Rage selected Flytrap, her major domo. Shokaract, their host, allowed two of his chiefs to battle for the honor. Antagony, a jet-black ant-droid, battled with Cataclysm, a mostly red and gold cybercat, in the Hyperious Arena. That there should be a Game even here, at this peaceable occasion, seemed an omen most ominous. In the end, Antagony seized Cataclysm's midnight-green whip as a trophy, and the spotted Predacon had to slink away in defeat. At least it wasn't to the death.

Stiletto was chosen to represent the neutrals, those without a state. The persistent whispers, that she had been touched by the Oracle, didn't hurt her reputation.

The final delegate was Megatron, head of the Darksyders. Rather than send a representative he chose to represent himself, and leave his business and criminal empires in the servos of his minions. When the first session was gaveled into order, he looked as if he wanted to swallow the entire room whole. Who knew, maybe someday he might.

All in all, politics had made some strange rechargefellows. There was a kind of balance. 7 Maximals, 7 Predacons, and 2 Builders. Lio Convoy thought that it would be difficult to achieve the two-thirds supermajority needed to enact binding legislation. He also thought that this was probably for the best. A tyranny of the majority is still a tyranny.

The longer he watched them debate, the more certain Lio Convoy was that he'd made the right decision. He had largely stayed out of the debates, citing his health as the reason. He looked down at his exo-walker with disgust. How like the Builders he'd become, in every way. But seeing Ram Horn yell and Antagony glower and Megatron clash with Optimal and Hot Rod make reasoned entreaties that only managed to infuriate made him certain that this body might well work, might enable all the disparate factions to come together and hash out compromises that made all sides equally unhappy but nonetheless might prevent outright oilshed. Their first act, at least, which passed 13-2, was to declare today, 25 solar cycles since the destruction of the Grand Mal, Stellar Cycle 6.4.15 of the Grand Uprising, to be Unity Day, and a planet-wide holiday henceforth. It was a touchingly optimistic gesture, and filled Lio Convoy with hope for his embattled species in all of its many flavors.

He turned and slowly hobbled away.

U Plus 2 Solar Cycles
Hydrax Spaceport, Resistance Territory

"Are you sure you have to go?" asked Blackarachnia. Lubricant threatened to leak from her treasonous optics.

"I am," said Lio Convoy gently. "My work here is done. I am now too polarizing a figure to remain behind."

"That's not true, you're…" He cut her off with a look. They had become so comfortable together, over the past few stellar cycles. "Yeah, all right. Maybe. But it doesn't seem fair."

That elicited a chuckle. "Since when has life been fair?"

She shared in the laugh, and then allowed her tone to become serious. "More fair now than six stellar cycles ago, my Nemean warrior."

"That's as may be, but the road ahead may well prove more challenging. The Resistance was never *for* anything. It was *against* the Builders, the Assembly, the class system and all it stood for. Our territory was ravaged, we stand diminished, but we still control a

significant portion of the planet. Now that the Cybertronian Parliament is in session, we—you—need a new identity."

"We'll find it," she assured him. "B'Boom has already begun talking about how we need to reorganize into autonomous states."

"I'm sure you will," he said, and he made her believe it too. That was always his gift. Visions of what the Resistance was, and what it could be, danced through her processor. A league of cities, standing together but maintaining their own identities, could lead the way forward. What was now a rabble of shell-shocked survivors might one day transcend, becoming a shining beacon, exemplifying the very best of what Cybertron could be. The details were elusive; the shape of things to come tantalizingly out of reach. For now. But not forever.

"You know, when I first came back from out there," she waved vaguely at the sky, "I was trying to get to Earth. Try to convince the Terrans to intervene. I wanted the strongest ally I could find. Who knew I'd find him here, on Cybertron?"

"Who knew indeed?" he asked warmly. "Perhaps in my travels I shall encounter them. There is a great rift between our peoples. Perhaps healing it is the next step in our race's journey." With that, he turned and walked away.

"Perhaps," she echoed. He limped into his ship and closed the hatch. A few scant cycles later, its engines ignited, and it carried away the finest Cybertronian she'd ever known. On a pillar of light, he rode off into the star studded darkness.

U Plus 57 Solar Cycles
The Depths of Rodimus' Folly

In the blackened depths of the cold, irradiated hellscape of the now second-largest crater on Cybertron there was a faint stirring. Molecules irrevocably quantum-entangled began to resonate, to draw closer to one another.

The process was slow, the tiny motes of matter were almost lost among the drifting particles that were the byproduct of the destructive energies that caused the crater. Atom by atom, molecule by molecule, they began to coalesce.

Slowly but surely they came together into the only shape the universe would allow. It began with the tip of a metal spike, a spike that became a claw. The claw attached to a

hand, which was assembled tendon by tendon, before shuffling sideways through the debris and connecting itself to the arm that had formed simultaneously.

Internal organs were fashioned, endoframe, exoframe, cranial structure, neural network, until, finally, the creature's newly forged optics opened. It staggered to its large, clawed feet, feeling the rush of data as sensory systems booted up.

When consciousness inevitably, tragically, returned, it fell to its knees, and cast its mandibled head back and gave a howl of sheer and utter agony that it had been cheated out of a death it had so richly deserved. The scream went on and on, until its vocoder was shredded, until the sound lost whatever paltry meaning it had. After many long cycles it stopped. The instant the wail ceased, it felt the slight scratching that indicated the traitorous vocoder had begun to heal. Then, awash in fatalism, it shifted to decapodian form for the first time and began the long, painful climb from the impossible depths, ascending towards the distant light.