

Transformers: Solar/Flare

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This is following my own little universe, so it doesn't tie in with any existing continuities.

Transformers (c) Hasbro

Gundog (c) Direwolf505 (FA)

Blue Falcon (c) countramsely (FA)

Roadtrain (c) Flankfire (FA)

Everything else (c) me (Amy)

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1 - Ruins

Cybertron

It was once a small haven, secreted away in the vast wastes of Cybertron, any outsiders ignorant to its existence. The inhabitants, those wanting nothing to do with the war that was tearing the planet apart, kept themselves hidden, only sending out small parties to secure provisions when needed. But now, this small haven was a burning wreck, a flame licked abomination of its former splendour, no thanks to a recent, and very much unexpected Decepticon raid. They'd made off with what they could before sending a small party of Seekers back to destroy everything in sight. The fires were still raging, feeding on the left over fuel, the cubes of Energon they couldn't reach secured firmly in a bunker that was now in ruins. In the distance, Contrail could see the young Cybertronian circling frantically above the towering flames, his yellow and red colours seemingly glowing in the firelight. Beyond the din of the raging fires, a voice could be heard, torn by the stresses of over use, yet still carrying a terrified and frantic note. The one who circled tightly called back, his voice just as frantic. Contrail watched as the youngster made a swoop in the brief lull in the flames, only to be beaten back by another violent explosion, one that vibrated through the air, rattling the old Cybertronian's circuits to the core. One of the last standing walls collapsed inward, into the fire. Contrail forced himself forward, as fast as his ageing propulsion system would allow. His hand shot out and clamped firmly around the ankle of the youngster.

"Lemme go!" He snapped angrily, casting an irritated look over his shoulder. "My sister's still down there!"

"Solar, if you go into those flames, you will not be coming back out!" Contrail snarled. "We cannot afford to lose another member of our already struggling community!"

Solar paused in his struggles to glare at his elder. Then his sister screamed again, her plea for rescue so desperate and ragged, it almost tore Contrail's Spark in two.

"Let me go." Flare said, almost calmly.

"No." Was the reply; Simple, yet horribly effective.

Contrail gave one last tug on Solar's leg and forced him to start flying away from the devastation.

"We have re-located to the North. When the fire's died down, we will come back to see what the extent of the damage truly is."

Solar grumbled something that Contrail chose to ignore and allowed himself to be dragged along through the smokey air.

Flare could see the fire crawling closer and closer to a stack of remarkably untouched Energon cubes. As the fire crept toward her, she dragged herself away, to huddle in a corner full of rubble and cracks. Her left leg was badly damaged, to the point where she couldn't put any large amount of weight on it. It hurt enough, without having to put up with the pain of having the limb snap off through trying to stand upright. Her propulsion system was offline and one by one, her sensors were shutting down. Already were the sounds around her muffled, the crackling and angry spitting of the fire sounding as if it had been smothered by something heavy and soft. Her vision was becoming an irritating array of static and jumping and jerking images, and her vocal processor felt like it was being slowly shattered by the effort

she was putting into her cries for help. Heaving herself across the debris riddled floor with her hands and right leg, which itself was badly damaged, she came to rest against the corner she'd been eyeing up. She leaned against it, trusting it with her weight. She cast her fading blue optics upward, toward the patch of sky the roof once obscured, and through the flames. A familiar figure was circling, as if searching. She barely recognised it as her twin brother, Solar, his beaten and scarred form a similiar shape, and of same colouration as herself. She could've swore he shouted something, but it was incredibly hard to tell. The flames had taken the last stack of untouched Energon, and another violent explosion shook the foundations and the remains that were still standing. The wall she was huddled against collapsed inward. Her arms instantly came up above her head, to try and shield herself against it. The heat had tripled in intensity. It felt like her circuits were melting inside her. Then everything went quiet. The din of the fire faded into nothingness. Her audio receptors had just failed. She cast a hopeful look skywards again, and managed to catch a fuzzy glimpse of her brother turning tail and fleeing. Her Spark sank. She sat and watched the encroaching fires from the relative safety of her corner. The way in which the wall had fallen had inadvertantly created a shelter around her of sorts, like a cocoon. A few moments passed, the fire starting to melt her armoured feet and her optics flickered angrily before rendering her in darkness.

If the young Cybertronian were to still be consciouse, and fully functioning, she'd have taken note of the sounds that underscored the main din of the fire; engines. Powerful engines. There was another group of Decepticons on their way, to see if they could pillage anything more. The flames swayed and then came in on themselves, as if being blown out. The flames bowed and arced in the same direction and a pair of bulky figures emerged.

"Burnout, keep those flames at bay. I've discovered the source of that signal." Said a heavily armoured Decepticon, his deep purple, spiked armour glittering ominously in the fire light.

The one he called Burnout, a Decepticon much larger than he, or any of his other comrades, nodded, and kept his large rotar blade at hand and pointed toward the fire, blowing it in one direction, away from his commanding officer and away from the figure that sat awkwardly in a ruined corner. He hunkered down and inspected the body, running a pointed finger tip across the panel line of Flare's left shoulder.

"Hmmm... Very interesting..." He mused quietly. "This one doesn't bear a faction insignia. And she's still online. Though just barely."

"Then she will be of use to us?" Burnout rumbled, paying very little heed to the flames he was keeping at bay. It was, afterall, something he'd done many, many times before.

"That she will, old friend. That she will." He said and rose, gripping a damaged arm and pulling, throwing Flare over his shoulder.

"Burnout, we have much to do, and very little time in which to do it. Leave the fires be and transform. I am entrusting this girl into your care."

"And what would you like me to do?"

"Take her to see Propshaft. See if he can get her back online. You know the drill."

"Yes, Crash." Burnout rumbled obediently.

Burnout follwed Crash and stepped from the fire. He eyed up Flare curiously. He doubted that even if she was an Autobot, like many an Autobot before her, even much bigger, he would easily crush her. Once clear of the flames and in a relatively open space, Burnout transformed, panels sliding around and flowing into position, a large rotar blade taking place at the rear and a much smaller one comming into being at the front of the newly formed Cybertronian chopper. Burnout lowered the main hatch and the unkown Cybertronian was deposited within.

"I shall return within five hours." Crash said before turning and rounding up the rest of his men to go on a

hunt for the other survivors.

It is going to be an interesting day.... Burnout mused as he took off and headed back to base.

Earth

"Then explain to me just why the Space Bridge isn't working anymore?" Krusher growled angrily as he loomed over Roadtrain.

The transformed KAMAZ continued to glare. *It's always my fault, isn't it?* He thought bitterly.

"I've *tried* explaining to you that I don't *know!*" Roadtrain snapped irritably, flailing his arms slightly out of exasperation. "Fixing things isn't my forte. You should know this by now."

Krusher's retaliation was lost somewhere in the immediate vicinity of his processor and what passed off as his mouth when a JCB digger trundled into the room.

"What is it this time, Steele?" Krusher grumbled, waiting impatiently for the inevitable bad news.

"The Epitaph is ready for launch." Steele announced.

"The bad news?"

"We've figured the problem with the Bridge...." The digger prouted legs and arms and rose to its feet.

"Someone's taken the teleport modulator..."

There was a moment of silence. Krusher turned away from Roadtrain and faced the Constructicon.

"..... How...?" Krusher asked, truly puzzled by the news.

"Uhm, between shifts, someone activated the Space Bridge from *outside*, came in, grabbed what they wanted and promptly left again before the Bridge sealed itself again."

"Who stole it?"

Steele gave what passed as a helpless shrug.

"No idea. I only build things, I don't programme computers or the like."

"Yeah, that was Wire Cutter's thing, so if *someone* hadn't have lost his temper so badly, we'd be halfway to the next inhabited planet by now." Roadtrain pointed out.

Krusher merely grumbled and dismissed what the transporter had just said.

"Autobots?" He prompted.

Again, a shrug.

"Doubt it. Those tunnels are sealed tight, just like you ordered. Even with Raid and Galaxy, I doubt they'd have gotten through by now."

"Well stop your doubting. Go check the tunnels haven't been breached. And you," He said, turning on Steele again, "Continue dismanteling the Space Bridge. Whether it's missing parts or not, I refuse to let the Autobots get ahold of it! Now move it!"

Roadtrain grumbled and walked off, clearly unhappy with his orders as Steele ambled back toward the Space Bridge cavern, leaving their disgruntled leader to finish packing the last of the viewing monitors.

2 - The Offer

Earth

The familiar sound of helicopters echoed across the town as it lay dormant, sleeping away the torment of the day. Adjusting their trajectory and height, a pair of military choppers slowly ascended. Most people wouldn't find anything odd about the AH-1W Super Cobra or the Bell UH-1C Huey Hog, but, having been born and raised in a world of nothing but war, they'd have realised there was something very off about them. Especially the anorexic looking AH-1W, which was not painted in military colours, but was of a blue colour, that was not in the least bit camouflaged, even on a clear blue day. The Huey Hog that flew by its side bore the familiar teeth of combat on its nose. Both choppers looked scarred and just about ready to drop from the sky as they continued their ever growing pace in descent, the nearby lake just beyond the outskirts of the town seeming like their target of approach.

"You think they're still here?" The AH-1W asked his battered comrade.

"If they'd have left, we'd have picked it up by now." The Bell UH-1C replied evenly, optics fixed firmly on his destination.

The pair made a slight adjustment in their flight and circled around, re-adjusting their trajectory to the opposite side of the lake, where the trees were undeniably thick. It would be the most logical of places to have an entrance. As they flew over the dark waters of the large lake, a flurry of bubbles broke the surface. Neither Autobot noticed, or if they did, they dismissed it.

"I'd dearly appreciate it if you held it still, Speeder." Flashpoint stated flatly, trying to keep his irritation at bay.

The sleek blue and silver form of Speeder fidgeted again, almost dropping the large cylindrical piece of metal on the transformed fire engine's head. With a growl from Flashpoint, Speeder retained his steady stance once more. He'd much rather be outside with Galaxy, putting the finishing touches on the outer hull of the newly built ship. The build had been incredibly difficult, since their original ship had pretty much been written-off when the systems failed upon entry of Earth's atmosphere, rendering them face first in the dirt and rock, the remains of an old mine, which they later discovered had been deemed as the perfect temporary home of Krusher's team, who'd taken up inhabitation of the opposite side. It still ground on the nerves of the Autobots that Krusher's gaggle of Decepticons had come into possession of a Space Bridge somehow, but that was their mission objective; Destroy Krusher and his team, retrieve the Space Bridge and return to Cybertron, a prospect, when thought about seriously enough, seemed like a distant dream.

"Sorry." Speeder muttered.

Flashpoint got back to welding the pipe into place and almost seared his fingertips off with the sharp flame when an alarm went off.

"What's that?" He asked, slightly puzzled. Then it clicked. "OH! Alarm! I remember now!" Flashpoint abandoned his work and hurried off towards the bridge, leaving Speeder in the newly constructed engine room on his own, holding a half welded pipe.

"Uh, you realise that if I let this go, it's technically not my fault, right?" Speeder called after the retreating

back of his comrade. "Hello? At least lemme know what's happening!"

His voice fell short of Flashpoint, who was already nearing the bridge, befuddlement flooding his mind. He approached the doors and they slid open on cue and he stepped onto the bridge. A slight feeling of awe washed through him as he looked about. It'd been a while since he'd been on the bridge, having spent most of his time with the engines, reconstructing them and reconfiguring them back into the ship. The sight before him, he decided, was a credit to Galaxy's underlying creativity and Deadmetal's secret intellect. The foreport was wide and sprawling, giving a massive view of what was outside. Consoles lined the edges neatly, with two smaller stations sat side - by - side just before the commanding chair that sat atop the first metallic terrace he was now stood on. It wasn't brightly lit like most ships for a reason. And that reason was occupying the command chair; Raid, leader of this small group of Autobots. In the last scuffle with the Decepticons, he'd lost his sight, his optics too damaged to be repaired away from Cybertron.

But somehow he'd managed, having learned to differentiate the dark, almost nonsensical blobs from the multitude of whites that he said made up the background of things. Flashpoint had decided it would be too difficult to explain it to the others, instead putting it in a way they would understand; Raid could technically see, just in black and white patches. Flashpoint had rigged up each access panel and console with something he called an Optic Visualiser, which allowed Raid to connect to the ship's sensors and see that way. Right now, he was sat in his chair, plugged in, a set of thin wires snaking from the right side of the chair and into the side of his head. He was quite comfortable, and although not content with having his vision limited to the ship's line of sight, he was content enough to not complain. At least, not in front of everyone.

"What's going on?" Flashpoint asked, walking up to stand beside Raid.

"We have two inbounds. They've yet to make contact." Raid replied simply, his blue optics focused on a point beyond the water-distorted bulky figure of Galaxy who was now doing something to the nose of the ship. "I've already alerted Deadmetal and Galaxy about it. I'm sure it's nothing they can't handle."

"I certainly hope so. The last thing we need is trouble, what with having lost access to the caverns in the mines."

"The re-build is one schedule?" Raid prompted lightly.

"Yes."

"Then we will follow Krusher and make his life an utter misery until we get the Bridge back. After all, that Bridge was Autobot property in the first place, and if we *don't* get it back, just think about how ol' Chassis will react." Raid said, with a slightly humourless grin.

A cold shudder ran through Flashpoint's circuitry. Chassis, even though he was old and creaky and couldn't care less anymore, wasn't one to annoy in any way, shape or form. The results of the punishments for failure could be messy.

"I'm wondering about how he'll react when he finds out you're blind..." Flashpoint said mindlessly, then grimacing inwards when he realised what he just said.

Much to his relief, his old friend took it in his stride, just as he did with everything else in life.

"I'm sure it'll provide him with ample fodder for the imminent I told you so's."

"Boss, I've just collected the two new-comers." Deadmetal's voice said, cutting into the growing conversation. "They're Autobots from the Eastern base."

"Designations?"

"Gundog and Blue Falcon." Came the reply.

"What condition are they in?" Flashpoint asked.

"Not good. They say they're the only survivors of a Decepticon attack."

Raid cast a glance at Flashpoint, who in return felt a slight pang of helplessness under that now almost lifeless stare. The lenses were glowing blue, but there was no focus in the optics. *If only we were back on Cybertron, this might never have happened...* He found himself thinking morosely.

"Bring them in." Raid ordered, fixing his near sightless stare back out the foreport as he let the ship do the seeing for him.

"I'll go get my equipment ready. The sooner they're repaired, the sooner they can tell us what went on." Flashpoint and strode off the bridge, making a bee-line for his newly refurbished medical bay.

Cybertron

An array of sensations finally returned to Flare bit by bit, as she slowly started checking her systems. All seemed to be working effectively, which came as a mild surprise, since the last thing she could remember was heat and pain. So much heat and pain. Above her she could hear sounds. Muffled voices were slowly becoming clearer as her newly repaired audio receptors came back online. Then her vision went from blackness to static then to a crisp, crystal clear vision of the wire and pipe riddled roof above her. The voices stopped. She could feel two sets of lenses on her, watching her. Her own lenses swiveled from side to side, scanning as much of the room as possible without actually having to sit upright.

"I see that she is still online." Said a gruff voice.

There was a pause then a reply.

"It was a challenge, the fire had done significant damage to her systems, but y'know me. I never back down on a challenge." An older sounding voice said.

Flare decided to stay silent. They were not voices she recognised and that made her extremely nervous.

"I'm sure that she'll make a fine edition to the ranks, with a little training of course." Said the same voice.

Flare decided she couldn't stand it any longer. She needed to know where she was, and who had repaired her and was talking about her. She pulled herself upright and looked around. She was in a shoddily constructed medical bay, but looks aside, she knew it did its job efficiently. Afterall, she was still online after a horrific attack.

"It's good to see you still alive..." The medic faltered, giving her a questioning look.

Flare stayed silent. Until she knew who these people were and why she was there, she wasn't saying her name.

"Why am I here?" She said instead.

The medic looked at the bulky, deep purple figure stood beside him. She followed his silver lensed gaze and realisation set in.

"You're Decepticons..." She said in a near whisper, sliding slowly from the operating table and backing up a few paces.

"Just because we are Decepticons, doesn't mean we wish to harm you." He said, trying to look harmless, a feat easier said than done. "My name is Crash, and I am commander of this humble little band of Decepticons." He said with a slight bow. "And this is my good friend, Propshaft. He repaired you and brought you back from the brink."

Flare just stared at him, silently scrutinizing him from what she considered to be a relatively safe distance in such a confined space.

"If you're going to try and persuade me to join with you--"

"I would never dream of it, my dear." Crash cooed innocently. "I was merely going to suggest it, leave the offer open, since you were left behind by your so-called Autobot friends."

"They didn't leave me behind..." She faltered, remembering the sight of her brother, Solar, turning tail and flying away, leaving her to die in the Energon fuelled flames.

"We've seen the footage from a security chip one of our men managed to salvage from the wreckage of your village." Propshaft interjected. "The figure was partially obscured by the fire, but it was definitely someone who looked very much like yourself on there."

"I don't believe you... My brother would never leave me behind." Flare protested.

Crash and Propshaft exchanged looks again. Propshaft walked over to an old, battered computer unit in the far corner, pressed a few buttons and the old screen beside Crash lit up with stuttered action. The images were fuzzy with static and fire dominated one side of the screen. But it was just as Propshaft had said. There was a figure who looked like her, and he did turn tail and flee. She suddenly felt very alone and hurt as if someone had just severed a limb. She looked from the old screen and then looked at the two Decepticons.

"You may leave if you wish, but even our best scouts don't know where your villagers have re-located to." Crash said, stepping to one side, leaving the doorway very much open, and inviting.

Flare took a step forward, then hesitated.

"No one will harm you. You are free to leave if you wish to do so. Burnout is by the main gates, ready and waiting to take you back to your old village." Crash prompted. Flare hesitated a moment longer. "On the other hand, there's always room for one more, and our dear Megatron would be ever so grateful if you were to hear out our side of the story, and help us in our quest for peace."

"Decepticons fighting for peace...?" She snorted. "Yeah, right."

"Oh, but it's true." Crash said. "If you will just give us a moment of your time to hear us out, then you may leave, if you do so choose."

She paused and thought about it a moment, weighing up her options, and thinking about where her village could have re-located to. With each thought, she drew a blank. The image of seeing her brother leaving her behind to die a painful death started to form a cold knot inside.

"Fine. It's not as if I have anything better to do right now." She grumbled.

After all, it would be rather interesting to hear the story from the opposite side.

3 - New Recruits

Earth

Gundog and Blue Falcon sat on the edge of the repair table in Flashpoint's medical bay. Both Autobots looked around intently, feeling slightly calmer and more at ease. Flashpoint had done his best to repair the damage to them that had been caused by a violent and unexpected attack on their base by the retreating Decepticons in the east. The door slid open and Raid walked in, his blue lenses scanning the room sightlessly. Galaxy followed closely behind, eyeing the new-comers up.

"My apologies, I had some issues with the secondary computer system, but I assure you, that Flashpoint has forwarded me your story and that you are welcome to stay aboard until we get back to Cybertron." Raid said politely.

Gundog leaned forward a bit, hands grasping the edge of the table as he looked at Raid's lenses. Blue Falcon grunted something and gave a slight nudge, gaining a dirty look from his comrade.

"Is there a problem?" Galaxy rumbled, keeping her optics firmly on Gundog.

"No." He replied simply.

"Good. Then we'll all get along nicely." She grinned. It wasn't a particularly pleasant grin, either.

"I'm sorry you two, but you must understand something; Raid has lost his sight, so he has to use other means of seeing, which is either via us, or the ship's sensors." Flashpoint said rather pointedly.

"Ah..." Blue Falcon murmured, "If you don't mind me asking, how...?"

"Decepticons." Was Raid's simple reply.

Blue Falcon muttered something to himself, gaining an interested look from Gundog.

"Do you know if there could be any more survivors of the bombing?" Raid asked, staring at the space between the pair.

Gundog gave a shrug and Blue Falcon just said "No idea. If there was, I'm pretty sure we'd have heard from them by now."

"Well, we got a couple more days before we can even consider leaving, so until then, keep your sensors high, kay?" Galaxy instructed.

"Fine." Gundog said, earning himself a slight glare from the large female Autobot.

"Oh, I intend to." Blue Falcon replied.

"I'm confident you're feeling up to some work, so if you'll follow me, I'll assign you to your tasks and introduce you to the others." Raid said and turned, gesturing vaguely in the doorway to the corridor that lay dimly lit beyond.

"How many more loads do we have?" Roadtrain groaned as the weight on his back grew more and more.

Hookshot paused in his movements, a piece of the outer support pillar for the Space Bridge tucked firmly under one arm and cast a quick, thoughtful glance over his shoulder at the space the Bridge was now slowly but surely vacating.

"After this, I'd say about... Two more loads." The Constructicon replied then carefully placed the piece atop the others.

"How does the boss expect this to work when we put it back together?" Steele commented abruptly from the rear of the chamber as he crouched before a junction box that led to the Space Bridge.

"I think he made contact with home before we started dismantling everythin' and requested a new techie." Hookshot replied thoughtfully.

"I hope it ain't another damn flyer." Roadtrain grumbled sourly.

"Knowing Krusher, he'll have wings or rotar blades." Steele grumbled, mirroring Roadtrain's outlook on all things flight capable.

Somewhere In Space...

A large battle cruiser, scarred, dented and heavily armed and armoured, floated almost aimlessly through an un-inhabited solar system. The sun caught the side of the massive black, oddly structured ship and the odd, almost tribal markings that adorned the vessel's hull seemed to glow a faint blue. A set of three powerful engines blasted out three identical streams of blue white into the darkness as it left the orbit of an equally impressive in size planet. Aboard the ship, its crew wandered calmly from area to area, the tails on their dark coloured uniform coats seemingly floating behind them as they moved through the maze of corridors, flowing like liquid. Sat in a launch bay that was situated at the fore of the ship, a sleek, alien craft sat, waiting patiently. It was quite content with watching the organics go about their business, checking the much smaller, crueller looking ships that surrounded it. A small, long fingered hand touched upon one of the alien crafts forward swept wings, running it across the smooth, white surface.

"We are almost at your requested destination, Jetstream. Are there any more preparations you require to be done before launch?" Asked the deep purple skinned creature, his mass of tentacle like dreads pulled back and tied with what appeared to be a metallic form of string.

"No. All my preparations are complete. Thankyou." Came the reply.

"Very well. We will arrive at the launch area in the next four hours."

The alien pivoted on his heel and sauntered away, a flimsy electronic pad in his hand.

Jetstream sighed inwardly. It was almost time to meet the new boss, in the metal and not just on-screen. To say that what Jetstream felt was nervousness, would be a slight understatement.

Cybertron

Solar glared across the barren wasteland, his optics fixed firmly on the slowly fading smoke that signified the location of his old village. A large hand landed on his shoulder. He didn't look. He knew who it was and why he had come.

"It is time to give up, Solar." Contrail said solemnly. "If she is still, by some miracle, alive, then she will find us. If not, then..."

"Then what's left of her will be used as scrap and replacement parts by the Decepticons." Solar grumbled, putting sound to the words that lingered in the air, unsaid by his elder.

Contrail remained silent, struggling to find further words. It wasn't easy. He eventually gave up and said instead;

"Wherry wants to see us. He's calling a group meeting."

"When?" Solar asked after a moment.

"In a few minutes in the foundation, so don't be late." Contrail rumbled and wandered off towards where

the meet would be held.

Solar remained in place, optics fixed on the horizon. He wondered about his sister, and what happened to her. Did she escape, or was she burned, melted down into scrap by the Energon fueled flames? Something didn't feel right. Surely, if she had died, he'd have felt it, right...? He mentally shook himself and turned away, putting the smoke to his back and walked off towards the foundation.

The foundation was a decent sized, circular room, big enough to hold fifteen bots. Solar counted seventeen, including himself, squeezed into the underground room. The roof was domed and a ring of lights ran around the upper most edges. Stood at the back was an old man, his armour flimsy, weapons all but useless. With each movement, a joint would creak out of protest. Stood beside Wherry was Contrail, the bulky figure scanning the crowd with vivid blue lenses. Solar looked over at him, and the old warrior seemed to relax a touch.

"Do you all know why we are here?" Wherry said abruptly.

There was a chorus of murmurs.

"Good. Then there is no doubt that you all know that we cannot risk going back and re-building. Such an endeavour would be suicide, and we have already lost so much." Wherry continued. "We have decided to go north, to search for a new place to reside."

There was another chorus of murmuring, this time, with a tone of slight disagreement.

"If you have any better ideas, then we will be interested to hear them." Contrail put in, ending the growing din.

The room went silent. It seemed everyone was fresh out of ideas or too tired to bother arguing.

"Very well. We will leave first thing." Wherry finished and turned and climbed down from his little makeshift podium.

"Great..." Solar muttered. "On the run. Again."

As he turned to leave, a large hand landed on his shoulder again. Contrail had fought his way through the crowd, leaving Wherry in the capable hands of his comrades.

"It is for the best."

"No it's not. We can't just turn tailpipe and run every time we see a Decepticon. It's not right. We're not weak." He growled.

"In our current state, we are. We are not trained enough to take on a group of Decepticon soldiers. They would reduce us to scrap." Contrail replied gruffly.

"Then train us! You have the combat experience!" Solar almost wailed. "If you trained us, then we could make a stand!"

"I tried training you once. You weren't interested. You and your sister were more interested in messing around than learning how to survive an attack." Contrail snapped, then cut himself short when Solar wheeled on him.

"That was years ago!" He snapped angrily. "Things have changed now, and I *want* to fight!"

Contrail straightened up, bringing himself to his full height. Solar had to crane his neck back just to keep optical contact with his elder.

"Even though I know what you intend to do with such training, I really have very little choice in the matter, do I?"

"No. Not unless you want to live out the rest of your days with me annoy the bolts out of you."

Contrail sighed heavily.

"Your combat training starts in fifteen minutes. I expect to see you back here then." He rumbled and walked off to find Wherry again.

Flare looked up at Burnout. The massive Decepticon troop carrier returned her gaze evenly. Crash and Propshaft had explained the Decepticon side of things, and now the young Cybertronian was weighing her options. With the village lost to the attack and her brother long gone, she really had nowhere to go. She kept playing that particular part of the security vid over and over in her head. The sight of her brother, her best friend, her identical twin, turning tail and fleeing, leaving her to a messy demise turning her once cheerful, optimistic outlook on life sour. She clenched her fists and looked at the scarred horizon. If she wished to leave, Burnout was ready to take her back to the village. If she wished to stay, then she could. A long moment's thought. Then the decision came so easily, it startled her. She looked back up at Burnout again.

"I wish to join the Decepticon ranks." She stated simply.

"Then I will take you to see Crash." Burnout rumbled in reply and escorted her back towards the main bulk of the base, the smattering of Decepticon soldiers that were milling about the yard pausing in their duties to have a look at the small Cybertronian as she was led by the bulk of a much feared heavy.

Earth

As the sun settled once more over the town, a few bubbles broke the surface of the lake, disturbing the calm waters. The bubbles grew in magnitude, fast becoming a torrent, sending waves splashing and sucking at the tiny beaches that surrounded the body of water. There was an eruption, then the water broke, a sleek nose of a large craft stabbing through the surface. The low rumbling continued as the lake seemingly gave birth to a massive shape, thick jets of fire at its rear, sending it skyward at an impossible rate. The water was forced from its hole, flooding the surrounding area as the massive Autobot ship powered toward the darkening sky, piercing the clouds, sending the grey vapours sweeping and curling in the alien vessel's wake. If any of the Humans in town and the surrounding areas managed to ignore the sudden din, there was something seriously wrong. Even the deaf wandered over to their windows to have a look. The vibrations of the launch had shook the foundations of the town deeply. Alarms were going off, dogs were barking and howling and people were shouting. But there was no need to worry about it anymore. All sentient mechanical life forms were leaving the dying planet. A little further away, the huge bulk of the Epitaph was also leaving Earth's atmosphere. Both ships shuddered as they pierced through into space. Raid scanned the entire ship. Everything was still functioning at full efficiency.

"Keep a tabs on the Epitaph's whereabouts." He said, an order that didn't need to be voiced out loud. It was something they'd been doing since they left Cybertron all those years ago.

The new arrivals, Gundog and Blue Falcon, were doing well, although Blue Falcon seemed to get along well with the others better than Gundog, who, Raid had decided, seemed to be slow to trust new comrades.

"The Autobot ship, Solstice, is following. Again." Roadtrain said, casually inspecting the instruments at his station.

"Keep engines on full, I don't want them interfering when we go to meet our new comrade." Krusher ordered.

"Engines are on full, we should be leaving the system in about four hours." Steele said.

Hookshot turned from his station and shot Krusher a curious look.

"Who is this new recruit, anyway?" He asked slowly.

Krusher just glared.

"An old contact, and a reliable soldier, that's all." He replied smoothly. "Now stop asking, and start doing, before I throw you out of the air lock."

"Yes boss." The crane grumbled and turned back to his station.

4 - Chase

Alien Ship

Jetstream sat in the launch bay in vehicle mode. The alarms were going off, red lights flashing a warning that the bay doors were about to open. The alien crewmen hurried from the area and kept watch over the goings on on the main floor from their protected balconies. The doors hissed, churning out a puff of vapour at their lower corners, then the behemoth doors slid open. Empty space loomed on the other side, inviting yet hostile. Jetstream's engines powered up with a low rumble that quickly grew into a high pitched, almost unheard whistling hum. A few moments. Then Jetstream launched from the bay and fled into the cold vastness of space, stars, galaxies and nebulae painted on the black around the two alien vessels. It was beautiful sight, Jetstream had decided long ago, and still considered it to be as such. Calming, yet terrifying. Welcoming, yet hostile. A beautiful, cold danger. In the distance, Jetstream could just about pick up the menacing form of another ship. Heading swiftly in that ship's direction determined it. The new ship was of Cybertronian origin. It was the small Decepticon battle ship, Epitaph.

Epitaph

All was remarkably quiet on the Epitaph's bridge. The small crew that were built of Hookshot, Steele, Roadtrain and Krusher were working at their stations, doing as they were supposed to do.

"We got an incoming." Roadtrain suddenly announced, breaking the silence.

"What kind of *incoming*?" Krusher rumbled from his chair of command.

"It appears to be Cybertronian."

"Show me."

A few buttons were pressed and the foreport switched magnification. There was something there.

Something pleasantly familiar. The small craft had forward swept wings, with an array of smaller wings dotted about its being. Krusher grinned.

"At last." He mumbled as they watched it get closer and closer.

"Boss?" Hookshot prompted.

"Open the docking bay doors." Krusher ordered.

The hull of the looming Decepticon battle ship started to develop a rectangular hole in its fore. Small lights lined the insides, beckoning for a landing. Jetstream steadied the rate of propulsion and slowly closed the distance, each passing moment sending a surge of unease and excitement throughout every circuit.

"Permission to come aboard, sir." Jetstream broadcast.

"Permission granted." Was the reply by an unfamiliar voice.

Waiting patiently in the docking bay was Krusher, hands firmly at his back. He looked out into space and at the Cybertronian jet as it neared the gaping maw of the his ship. He grinned. *What news would*

accompany the scout this time? He mused to himself. Breaking through the outer shielding of the Epitaph, Jetstream's engines were now audible, no longer swallowed by the vastness of space. He watched as his old friend landed, sliding to a graceful halt on flat landing gear.

"Welcome aboard, Jetstream. It's been a while." Krusher said coolly.

Panels shifted and flowed and arms and legs erupted from the body of the jet. Jetstream stood upright, stretching and flexing every available limb.

"Mmmmm, it feels good to be moving like this again." Jetstream purred happily.

"Come, I'll introduce you to my meager crew before we discuss business." Krusher said with a smile and led the new crewman through the bowels of the ship and up onto the bridge.

They navigated the vast corridors, Jetstream keeping a short distance away from Krusher, trailing him, optics taking in the new surroundings. The ship was new. Or it could be the same one, just with an upgrade. Jetstream mused. Ahead stood a set of large metallic black doors. Krusher prodded a button and they slid open, revealing the daunting, terraced bridge and its three crewmen.

"So it's down to three now, is it?" Jetstream asked.

Krusher merely nodded.

"It was a great loss." He said bleakly. "Especially Turbulance and Wire Cutter. They were two fine Decepticons." He finished morosely, neatly side stepping and avoiding the fact that it was himself that had terminated the small electrician and outcasted one of the finest soldiers he'd ever known.

"I don't know of Wire Cutter, but it's quite hard to forget someone like Turbulance. His death was too early." Jetstream replied, then eyed up the three who'd turned around in their seats to get a better look at the new-commer.

"It's *female*." Hookshot said from the corner of his metal plated mouth.

"I had noticed." Roadtrain grumbled. "And she's a flyer too."

"Start complaining, Roadtrain, and you'll be floating through deep space before you know it." Krusher rumbled.

"I wouldn't consider it." Roadtrain replied, making a small, mock bow in his seat.

Krusher grunted.

"This is Jetstream." He announced, fighting back his retort, "She's our new intelligence officer. I expect you'll treat her with respect."

"What, no techie?" Steele asked expectantly.

"I do tech work too, so I ain't completely useless." Jetstream replied evenly with a slight smile.

The Constructicon seemed to relax a little. *No more fiddling around with ridiculously tiny wires and chips anymore...* He thought happily.

Jetstream spied one of the empty consoles and approached it purposefully.

"Well discuss things later. Right now, we have an Autobot ship to sort out." She said as she sat down at her newly acquired station.

With a twitch of an optic, Krusher re-took his own chair and started out with the orders. Hookshot leaned slightly toward Roadtrain and whispered;

"Think I'm gonna like this one." He grinned.

"Should give the ol' bolt a run for his Energon." Roadtrain conceded with an equally sly grin.

"Activate the weapons and bring the shields to full." Krusher ordered.

"I'm Hookshot." The Crane said. "These guys are my buddies in crime, Roadtrain, head logistics and the sad looking guy on your otherside is Steele."

"Jetstream. And thanks for introducing me. Krusher always throws me in at the deep end without so

much as an introduction." She replied.

Solstice

"The Epitaph's making a hard turn." Galaxy rumbled from her position on the upper terrace behind Raid. Raid turned his head slightly, silently acknowledging the large female's observation.

"Weapons are hot, ready to fire." Gundog announced from the far side of the bridge, tucked away in his little cubbyhole, keeping an eye on the ship's secondary weapons systems.

"Only fire when you have an opening." Raid said calmly.

"That's if there's such thing." Deadmetal said bluntly, checking the read outs on his console again, just to be sure what he was seeing was correct.

From beside him, Speeder was doing the same.

"The Epitaph's shields have been upgraded *big time*. We'd be lucky if we can get a hit in and do any minor damage."

"We'll just have to hit them with everything we've got, and do it as hard as we can." Blue Falcon replied.

"No." Flashpoint said abruptly. "We must be very careful with what energy we use. We're running low on fuel as it is, and until we find an Energon source, we need to be wise with our maneuvers."

"And if the Decepticons get away?" Blue Falcon prompted, a hint of anger edging his tone.

"What if they get away? We know where they're going, and I'd rather we get to that destination too in one piece." Flashpoint replied evenly.

"Calm down, the pair of you." Raid said. "If they attack first, which no doubt they will, then we will merely test the water, so to speak. If their shields prove as effective as Deadmetal and Speeder say, then we will make a tactical retreat."

"Tactical retreat my skid plate..." Blue Falcon muttered.

Raid merely stared blankly in his general direction. Behind him, Galaxy bristled with the slightest hint of looming anger.

"If I were you kid, I'd watch your audio synth. Raid's got us through more scrapes than you could ever hope to imagine." She snapped.

"Galaxy..." Raid warned softly.

"Sorry boss." She mumbled and re-directed her attention back to her station.

Speeder gave Blue Falcon a slight nudge and a questioning look. Blue Falcon just shrugged lightly.

"Sorry, dude. Can't help it. The Decepticons just get me so, so..." He trailed off into a frustrated growl.

"Know that feeling. I owe several some severe beatings. But don't worry. These guys are going down, and they're gonna go down hard. Just obey orders with as little questions as possible, and you'll be just fine." Speeder said in a hushed tone.

As predicted, the Decepticons were the first to open fire. A single shot slammed into the Solstice and the shields glittered momentarily.

"Everything's holding, sir." Gundog announced.

"Galaxy, primary cannon on their aft." Raid ordered calmly.

Galaxy did as she was told, and the charged shot burned through the smaller laser fire that was bombarding their ship, and hit home, dead on the main exhaust of the Epitaph. The Decepticon ship didn't even shudder.

"Their shields are still at maximum strength. Ours; not so maximum..." Speeder groaned as he took a quick glance out of the foreport and at the hideous black ship that loomed before them.

Raid grunted. All kinds of plans and ideas flew through his mind, all of which comprised of using an excessive amount of precious fuel.

"Adjust position, try and orbit them and use as much fire power as you can without completely depleting us." He rumbled.

Deadmetal maneuvered the sleek vessel around the enemy in an irritating orbital pattern whilst Galaxy and Gundoog unleashed the Solstice's armament unto the Decepticon craft. The Epitaph's shield flared and rippled like water, but otherwise held steady. Their own shields were not doing so well.

"One more hit like that," Deadmetal grunted as the Solstice was violently shook by the Epitaph's main plasma cannons, "and we'll be scrap floating through space."

"Time for one of your infamous retreats, Deadmetal." Raid said.

Deadmetal nodded and shifted the ship's positions so abruptly, the masses of laser fire shot in the wrong direction. But the rear guns on the Epitaph didn't. One shot; the Solstice's shields failed. Another shot; struck the exhaust hard, the chain reaction causing an explosion within the bowels of the Autobot ship. Sirens screamed and the Solstice's systems shut down one by one, leaving them stranded in darkness. Flashpoint manually heaved the bridge's doors open and fled the area, running as fast as he could for the engine room, Galaxy and Speeder in hot pursuit. The rest of the crew watched as the Epitaph left them stranded.

"Why're they leaving so soon?" Blue Falcon snorted from the fore of the bridge.

"They either don't have the fuel we do, or they're feeling bold." Deadmetal replied.

"Flashpoint? Status." Raid commanded over the emergency in-ship com line.

The line crackled and buzzed, then Speeder's voice came through.

"The engine's are down. That last shot fried them good. We've just put the fire out." He said.

"Fire?"

"Not too big. Nothing I couldn't handle. But when Flash gets down here, man he's gonna be angry..."

5 - Mines

Cybertron

Flare thumbed the fresh purple insignia on her chest. There were four more on her upward swept wings, one Decepticon insignia on each side. She'd taken the oath, which was, much to her terror, witnessed over a vid link by the highest ranking Decepticons, including Megatron himself. As soon as she received her faction insignia, she heaved a sigh of relief. She didn't much care for being the center of attention, instead preferring to blend into the scenery, a trait she was very good at, and something she, and the others, hoped would prove extremely useful. But one other thing irked her more than anything. Both Crash and Megatron had agreed that to prove her full worth, she'd have to do the hardest thing in her life; hunt her brother. That was her first assigned mission, something that hurt deeply and gave her second thoughts, only to have the security vid spring to the surface again and replace the questioning with bitterness. He'd left her to die, and so now it was her turn to make him hurt. If she could persuade him to join the Decepticon ranks, fine. But to kill a relative, an identical twin; it was the ultimate test of loyalty to her new faction. She was so deep in thought that she didn't notice Burnout, who had wandered up beside her. He looked into the steel crate of ammunition and then looked at the electro-pad the much smaller Decepticon held loosely in a yellow hand.

"Having some difficulty, Flare?" The massive figure rumbled.

Flare jumped and gasped sharply. How could someone so big stay so quiet and unnoticed?

"Uh, no. Not all, sir." She blurted and promptly got back to work, sorting through the new ammunition and checking each piece off on the pad she held.

"You seemed awfully distracted there. Something the matter?" He queried.

Something in his tone made her slow her actions to a near stop. She glanced up at him, then looked back at the pad and back into the container.

"Nothing much. Just the fact that I'm now one of the bad guys, pedalling doom and gloom across the universe." She muttered.

Burnout chuckled and patted her on the shoulder lightly, so as not to knock her over.

"Trust me, we are working for a good cause. We will have peace very soon." He said. He paused a moment, watching her more closely. "Is it your first mission?" He said.

"What?" Then she caught on and her shoulders sagged slightly. "Oh, yeah. My first mission." She sighed, halting her movements and turning around, leaning on the container side and looking across the empty hanger. "It's just, well... Uh.." She faltered.

"Hard? Cruel? *Impossible?*" He prompted. "Try no to think too hard about it. Afterall, what is a brother who gives up so easily on his own gears and Energon, hm?"

"But we've been through so much together!" She protested angrily. "How could he leave me?!"

"Fear." Burnout replied simply. "And ignorance. To flee in such a simple minded manner, shows weakness."

"Maybe someone else was there and *made* him leave." She muttered thoughtfully.

Burnout shook his head.

"I was at the fore of the final raid group. My optics can see for many miles, and I saw only him circling the flames. And it was only him who left." He lied.

Flare looked up, into the red optics of the massive Decepticon. The only thing she saw there was pity edged with a cold malice.

"I detest people like that." He continued, breaking her blue gaze. "Similiar has happened to me one too many times before. It hurts worse than the deepest wounds. To have someone close to you betray you in such a way..." He trailed off into a growl, his behemothic three fingered fists clenching. Then he sighed steadily. "My apologies."

"No need to apologise." She mumbled, feeling lost once more.

"I will be accompanying you on your journey." He said abruptly. Flare looked at him, a little puzzled. "I am an experienced fighter, and from what I have heard, you have had very little training in combat."

"Actually," Flare said, looking away and looking a little embarrassed. "I've had no combat training..." She admitted.

Burnout grunted something.

"Then that is something we will have to change." He said, a slight smile illuminating his optics. "Some of the smaller members of our crew will be sparring in the rear courtyard in an hour. I suggest you finish up and meet me there. You could learn a trick or two."

Before Flare could reply, he wandered off through the huge, open doors.

Solstice

The only thing aboard the Autobot ship that was making any sound was Flashpoint. His swearing and hammering could be heard throughout the ship. *I certainly hope that's all for effect...* Raid pondered slowly as he stared at nothing. Flashpoint had to take everything offline to get a proper look at the damage in the engine room, which rendered their leader completely blind. Without any amount of power to the Solstice, he couldn't use any of the Optical Visualizers Flashpoint had set up for him in the console interfaces.

"I had no idea a voice could carry so clearly through a ship this size." Gundog said, a touch amused at the random clipped words of anger and dismay that floated through the corridors.

"Anything's possible when Flashpoint's involved." Deadmetal said flatly.

There was a series of dull *thunks* on the hull of the ship.

"That didn't sound good." Blue Falcon said, looking through the fore screen.

"Flashpoint?" Raid broadcast digitally.

The query popped up in the fuming fire engine's head and startled him from his anger, returning him to momentary calm.

"Yes?" Came the weary reply.

"I need basics online now. Something's just hit the hull and I don't think it bounced."

"Basics comming online now."

The bridge lit up dimly and suddenly Raid could see through the ship's massive array of sensors. He switched to external scans. The view of the hull was not pleasant. Blackened and heavily dented by laser fire, it was a wonder the hull hadn't been breached. Then he spotted the sources of the sudden, unnerving noises. And what he saw sent his circuits cold. Three, rough black and silver diamond shapes had attached themselves to the outer hull in various places. A red light flashed solemnly and lazily at their peaks. Mines. Raid cursed silently. The grips were in too deep to pry the mines safely off in time for the inevitable explosions.

"Galaxy?" He barked over the in-ship com.

The large Autobot stood just outside the engine room flinched.

"Raid? What's the matter?"

"We got latch mines. Get outside and transform. We're abandoning ship."

"Oh slag..." Gundog muttered. "We ain't hitchin' a ride in her, are we?"

"I said *abandon ship*, now move!" The massive tank boomed angrily. Now was not the time to argue.

"Dee, I need functioning optics."

Deadmetal was already on his feet and at Raid's side. Raid planted a large hand firmly on his shoulder.

"I showed you where the exits are, didn't I?" Deadmetal said hurriedly.

The two new recruits nodded.

"Then move as quick as you can, and get outside." He said.

Gundog and Blue Falcon ran from the bridge and headed for the nearest exit.

"Ready?"

"Get moving already." Raid snapped.

Deadmetal gave a quick nod and guided Raid as fast as possible off the ship.

Outside, in the cold darkness of space, a large, deep green space shuttle with fiery orange markings was taking shape. Speeder was with Galaxy, clinging onto her still transforming body, as was Flashpoint. Blue Falcon and Gundog were half way across the distance between them and the Solstice and approaching fast. Blue Falcon cast a quick glance over a shoulder and spied one of the mines. He swore bitterly. Deadmetal and Raid launched from one of the air locks and headed for Galaxy, who watched in mild annoyance as she let the last panel slot into position. The mines exploded, sending the Solstice tumbling through the vacant dark. Deadmetal and Raid were propelled forward, out of control. "Help me with this." Flashpoint said and lunged for one of Galaxy's tail fins. Speeder and Blue Falcon followed suit, grabbing each other's ankles while Flashpoint reached out and caught one of Deadmetal's rotar blades. Everyone's joints protested at the new punishment, but the pair's tumble was brought back under control. The robot chain was disbanded one by one, each bot sliding through Galaxy's airlock. Once inside their temporary mode of spacial transport, they took up their seats, Raid and Deadmetal at the fore. Everyone watched as the Solstice tumbled into the dark distance.

"Follow it." He ordered.

Galaxy engaged her powerful engines and set about following their stricken ship.

"What about the Decepticons?" Blue Falcon asked slightly irritably.

"What?!" Galaxy rumbled. "I ain't going after no Decepticons like this! I ain't got the fire power in vehicle mode, and if you think I'm gonna let you lot tumble through space when I'm up to my optics in those good-for-nothing tin cans--"

"What she means is, that we ain't all that menacing without our ship." Speeder supplimented, cutting Galaxy off. "So settle down. We know where they're headed, so we can get them later."

Galaxy grumbled something.

"I don't like this one bit." Gundog muttered.

"Neither do I, but it's happened, so get over it." Galaxy snapped.

"I know you're all frustrated, but if the arguing doesn't stop now, you'll all be floating through space without any aid of any sort." Raid snapped.

Everyone fell silent.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't grip the arms of my chairs so tightly." Galaxy finally said after a long moment's silence.

Raid released his frustrated grip. "Sorry." He mumbled.

Epitaph

"What do you mean by that?" Krusher grunted.

"We mean, that that charged exhaust shot nearly overloaded the systems." Jetstream replied as she hunched over one of the burnt out generators in question.

"Fortunately, the only other thing that was affected, was our navigation systems." Steele added.

"Fortunately?" Krusher rumbled. "*Fortunately?! We're so off course, I'm surprised we haven't gone full circle and ended back in Earth's solar system!*"

"It can be fixed! I swear!" Steele yelled, raising his hands defensively.

"When's the soonest you can have things fixed?"

"Couple hours. Depending on how badly you need the shields and how badly damaged the circuits are damaged." Jetstream shrugged.

Krusher mumbled something.

"Keep me informed." He said then stalked away.

Cybertron

Solar landed hard on his face with a pained grunt. Contrail had been ruthless in his training, and the young Cybertronian now bore all the dents and scars of a seasoned warrior.

"You are not concentrating!" Contrail rumbled angrily. "Pull your head out of the clouds and *think*. You have yet to land a true blow on me. Anymore of this, and we'll be picking your pieces up off the ground." Solar heaved himself unsteadily to his feet. His vision went fuzzy then cleared.

"Can we have a break...?" He wheezed, a hand on his head. "I think something's been dislodged in my head."

"Yeah. Your processor." Contrail snorted and folded his arms.

"Funny." He groaned.

"If you are to face any Decepticons, then you *need to concentrate and learn!* All this faffing about will get you nowhere but the scrap heap."

Solar looked down at his feet. He was trying, he was concentrating. He thought, anyway. His mind was still set on his sister, Flare, and finding her, or what was left of her.

"When can we continue training?" He asked solemnly.

"As soon as you have recovered enough to start concentrating. And the sooner that happens, the sooner you can go and look for Flare." Contrail said and headed back into the temporary shelter.

6 - Scree

Cybertron

Flare looked her opponent square in the optics. He was slightly larger than she, but she'd quickly learned, thanks to Burnout's minor hints from the sidelines of the courtyard that served as a sort of sparring arena, that to get the better of a larger opponent, use your size and wit, not brute force and ignorance, to get one up on them. Performed properly, it can be lethally effective, especially if one can latch onto the backs of said opponent, where a large amount of damage can be performed relatively unhindered. Her opponent was a Constructicon by the designation of Scree. He was one of the smaller of his kind, working in the tight spots that his larger, bulkier fellow Constructicons couldn't get to. He pounded a fist into an open palm. Flare carefully continued her wide circle around him, trying to keep a tabs on where his limbs were, what they were doing in an attempt to try and figure out his next move. He lurched at her, fist pulled back, other hand outstretched to grab her. She rolled off to one side, but Scree's recovery was fast and unexpected. The length of metal that served as his crane arm in vehicle mode swung out, taking her feet out from beneath her. She'd come to learn that he often used his crane arm like a tail, the small but sturdy hook adding to its effectiveness as a weapon. She landed hard, face first. Scree stood over her. She looked up at him from the corner of a lense. A large hand lowered. She hesitated, wondering if it was some kind of ruse, a dirty trick he had in mind. She prepared for what ever he had in store for her as best she could and gingerly took his hand. He did nothing more than heave her back to her feet and congratulate her with a hearty slap on the back.

"Well done!" He beamed. "I wasn't expecting you to be so tough."

Scree was only a few years older than she, but in those few years he had on her, was an extra amount of experience, something she wished she had.

"I've had a little help with my fighting." She said quietly, casting a slight look over her shoulder and at Burnout who was walking purposefully across the courtyard. "Before today, I didn't know how to fight."

"Ah," Scree said. "that explained, I can let go of the little mistakes in your rather frayed fighting pattern. It takes time and patience to develop your skill properly."

"That it does." Burnout rumbled from behind as he slowed his approach. "You should take any advice Scree gives you to Spark. He's wise beyond his years, as horribly cliché as it sounds." The big Decepticon smiled.

"You're too kind." Scree said, with a little mock bow, hand on chest plate.

"At this rate, a few more days, and we will be ready to depart for your first assignment." He said.

Seranta 4 - Outpost

A lone figure sat in the far corner of the multi-racial bar, watching as the various species of all colours, sizes and viscosity went about drinking themselves under the tables and starting the occasional fight. He sat hunched, his multi toned grey, silver and black armour glinting sharply in the bright neon of the sign that hung on the wall just off to his right. A small, organic creature with rough, deep green skin and three eyes shuffled up, holding a tray at chest height balanced atop one webbed paw. The female looked her patron up and down, taking in the sourness that seemed to radiate from his metal bulk.

"'nother one o' dem Energon things?" She asked raggedly in a high pitched voice.

Turbulence slowly turned his head in her direction, looking down at her from the large table he was seated at. Two large, burning red optics focused lazily on her.

"No. I'll be leaving in a moment." He grumbled and looked away, back into the heaving floor space of the back alley bar.

"Suit yerself, traveller." She stated and shuffled off into the crowd.

Since being outcast by Krusher, he'd been wandering from place to place, trying to avoid any Decepticons. The seeds of rumour his former boss had sewn throughout the Decepticon ranks had spread like wild fire, reaching everyone from the Autobots right down to the insignificant bog creatures of Myridz. No longer bound to Cybertron law due to his current status as a dead bot, he was left to do his own thing, which was fine by him. He'd quickly come to learn that being 'dead' had its advantages. He'd discovered a few lost Cybertronians, and had gained connections with them, surviving on hand - to - hand trade. The three he'd met consisted of an ex - Decepticon, someone who'd left the floundering ranks of her so-called brave leader, and now went from place to place selling anything she could get her hands on. The second, a factionless Cybertronian went about doing everyday tasks on the planets and stations he visited, but preferring the courier aspect of his odd-jobs. Another, much to Turbulence's bewilderment and amuse, was an Autobot. He was small, insignificant looking and went around as a freelance maintenance bot, acquiring his needed equipment of the moment through passing trade and shady dealings. Turbulence, on the other hand, preferred to be in the thick of it, taking on any mercenary work to pass his time whenever he got bored.

Right now, he was staring blankly into the multi-heighted throng of critters and monsters on the main floor, chin rested on the knuckles of his steeped alloyed hands. Staring blankly on appearance, but thinking hard on the inside, his processor working overtime, formulating a plan, that ranged from the downright childish to the cruelly cunning; anything to bring Krusher down a notch or two, and with any luck, humiliate him, hopefully with the Autobots or some other Decepticon of higher rank in his presence. *But then, why do that, when Roadtrain and co will have a field day with such a moment?* He could imagine the repercussions, and he grinned, a nasty chuckle escaping his metallic mouth, making a pair of customers look at him as they walked by. He rose from his seat and headed toward the door, slapping a small sliver of a flexible plastic like strip on the higher end of the bar that was designed for the much taller of the patrons. The Troll like creature grunted acknowledgment at the tip.

"Hope to see you here again, friend." He snorted as politely as he could, for the tips he gained, served as his bi-weekly wages.

"I'm sure you will." Turbulence muttered almost absently as he walked out into the strange light of the streets.

Outside the bar, a brawl involving a group of Turoxans had spilled into the road, the fight going unnoticed until a couple of the larger members of staff at the bar came out with long, electrified poles to separate them. Turbulence watched for a few moments then looked to the east, and at the large pillar mounted clock that sat hideously in the center of the circular town center at the end of the grubby and narrow street. All he needed to do was cross it, and vanish into the alley opposite and await one of his connections to turn up. Unless they were already there.

He walked out into the town center, a poorly maintained circle of run-down trade huts that sat against a tall, faceless wall of roughly cut brown stones. Trade here was in full swing and all the different races and species from the different parts of the galaxy went about their daily business. Something knocked as politely as possible on Turbulence's leg. He looked down to see a thin, near skeletal figure with the head

of an insect and body of a bird, its multiple long arms and legs stick thin.

"What do you want?" He rumbled irritably.

"Spare some money for the poor, sir?" It asked, holding a thinning tin cup up with a shaking claw.

"Get the hell away from, pest." He growled and made to kick the creature away from him when something caught his optic.

Across from him, stood in the shadows of the opposite alley, a short figure stood, leaning casually against one wall, arms crossed, watching the world go by. Turbulance proceeded to ignore the creature and set off across the center circle. The robotic figure looked in Turbulance's direction and a smile slowly crept across its metallic features.

"I've been waiting for you to arrive." The new Cybertronian said.

"We weren't supposed to meet for another five minutes." Turbulance replied evenly.

"Does it really matter now you're here?" He replied.

Turbulance gave a slow shake of his head then looked around at his surroundings. It didn't really matter if you didn't check for any unwanted audio receptors listening in on your conversation, because on this outpost, almost anything went. Still, it was a force of habit, and one that had served him well over the years.

"Did you manage to keep track of them?" He asked.

His smaller - for want of a better word - companion nodded.

"The Epitaph's left that planet Earth. Dunno where it's headed next, but they seemed pretty determined to go it alone."

Turbulance gave him a questioning look.

"Autobots...?" He prompted slowly.

"They have a big, white ship, yes?"

"Yes."

"Then who ever's in command of the Epitaph just had them marooned in deep space. A set of Latch Mines can do wonders to one ship, y'know?" The smaller bot replied wistfully. "I remember when my ship got some Latch Mines stuck on its hull... What a mess..."

Turbulance sighed.

"Any ideas on the Epitaph's co-ordinates?"

"For a small fee, I may be able to remember a few more details, yes."

Turbulance groaned.

"I have nothing left. Anything I can acquire for you?"

There was a long moment's silence, then he brightened up, his blue optics shining vividly.

"A teleport modulator." He said, snapping his metallic fingers. "The kind you can find on portable, free - standing Space Bridges."

Turbulance gaped. A few days back, he'd sold one that he'd been hanging on to. He'd stolen it from Krusher while no one was looking. The task was hard, and had required an immense amount of skill and cunning, but he'd pulled it off, the only problem being, that the worm hole the Space Bridge had created spat him out on some back water planet that was inhabited by nothing more than tiny seven appendaged creatures that resembled barbed wire. Thankfully, this old space station, now used as a sort of half-way house, was sharing the barren world's system.

"I'll get you one." He said. "When d'you need it by?"

The ex-Autobot put on a show of thought.

"You've got a week. Tops. Anymore days beyond that, and the transaction's off, got it?"

"Meet back here?"

"Do me fine." The little ex - Autobot said with a smile. "Have fun, and good luck."

Turbulence turned and walked away, leaving the contact in the shadows. Now he just had to try and locate that teleport modulator. It was more than likely halfway across the galaxy by now. *Better start looking now.* He thought bitterly. He looked up at the sky. It glinted all shades of colours, rippling like water, changing from a light blue, to green, to pink, to purple, the effect created by the ageing environment generators that kept the old outpost inhabitable for organic beings. To leave the station, he'd have to make his way to the port before he could transform and start his hunt.

7 - Hunting

Cybertron

Solar looked up at Contrail. Wherry, the clan's elder, was stood a few paces behind him, watching intently. Within the past few days, the young Cybertronian's training had been progressing wonderfully, each lesson sinking in and being used to their full extent. The final stages of his training would be made more difficult with Wherry's plans to move to a new location. Sparring on the move would prove to be a finicky task at best, as the migrational habits of the dwindling group of factionless robots allowed for little rest.

"Now what?" Solar prompted expectantly.

Contrail stayed silent for a moment then replied; "Now you rest. We have a long journey ahead of us, and as you know, it is littered with dangers of the Decepticon kind."

"We leave at zero four hundred tomorrow." Wherry said hoarsely.

Solar winced inwardly at the time. He was not an early morning person.

"It will be difficult to train when on the move, but the inevitable battles with any marauding Decepticons, will prove useful, and add to your mounting skill."

"It is time to retire for the night." Wherry announced. "Tomorrow, we will make for the north peninsula, where another group much like our own has taken up hiding."

The old Cybertronian then walked away stiffly.

Epitaph

Once again, an argument was underway among the small group of Decepticons. Krusher scrubbed at his metallic face with a hand and groaned irritably.

"And I told you we should've stayed and finished them off!" Jetstream snapped angrily, lenses narrowing on Hookshot.

"I'm not the one who suggested the stupid Latch Mine idea. That was *you!*" The Constructicon replied, equally as angry.

"Will you two just *shut up!?*" Krusher growled, "You're giving me a processor ache!"

Both Decepticons went quiet instantly, optics locked on one another.

"Bet Jetstream throws the first punch." Roadtrain mock whispered to Steele, who in turn nodded, trying hard to suppress his grin.

"Shut up, you two! No one's throwing the first punch, but *me!*" Krusher growled. "Now, tell me; Where are Raid and his underlings now?"

There was a moment when vacant looks were exchanged from Decepticon to Decepticon, then they all turned back to their stations and started working furiously.

"Well?" Krusher prompted impatiently.

"Uhm..." Hookshot mumbled. "About two hundred and seventy nine miles away from where we last left them."

"Do we go back and finish them, or carry on?" Roadtrain asked.

For once, Krusher was lost on what to do. He so badly wanted to get back to Cybertron, yet he didn't.

The Space Bridge was missing a vital component, and he'd look foolish for bringing back a dud Bridge. He thought a few moments longer, ideas and scenarios filtering quickly through his mind, giving him all kinds of solutions and outcomes. Finally, he came to a conclusion, albeit a grudging one.

"We go back for the Autobots. Finish them off then go and look for the missing piece of the Space Bridge."

"What is the Bridge missing?" Jetstream asked curiously.

After the whole fiasco with the repairs, she still hadn't had enough time to be updated on what was going on, so each bit of information that was given out, she had to piece together, bit by bit, like a puzzle.

"The teleport modulator." Krusher replied evenly. "It was stolen by an outside source before we could fully dismantle the Space Bridge."

"And it weren't an Earthling, either. They got in *and* out via the Bridge. Pretty slick, huh?" Steele commented.

"And they managed that without losing limbs?" Jetstream said in mild amazement.

"As far as we can tell, yeah." Hookshot said.

"They even locked us out of the Bridge's main system, so we can't figure out who did it."

Jetstream looked at Roadtrain.

"And none of you can get in, I'm guessing?" She said flatly, with a hint of mocking edging her tone.

"No. That's your job. Now get to it." Krusher ordered.

Planet - Muborthia

Running hard down the side of a hill on an old dirt trail that had been almost reclaimed by the plant life was a short, but slim figure with near black skin. White freckles ringed the young male's large, slit pupilled eyes. He beat back protruding branches that got in his way and as soon as the ground levelled out, he almost stumbled and fell into the loose dirt. Long arms flailing for balance, he eagerly spied the small, stone and wood constructed house in the distance, ringed by a semi-circle of tall trees. What the boy was fleeing would surely get him into some amount of trouble, as he wasn't supposed to be up on that particular hill, but for once, his random spate of disobedience would prove useful. Or, at least, he hoped. Weaving frantically through the intricately set up raised flower beds, he barged through the carved wood front door and slid to halt in the stone tiled dining room that doubled as the kitchen. The house was small, with two bedrooms upstairs and two, equally smaller rooms downstairs.

"Adraahn, where have you been, boy?" His father, a taller version of the boy with jet black skin demanded.

The young male, Adraahn went silent. If he told his father where he'd been, he'd no doubt get strapped for it. On the other hand, what he saw up on Thieve's Hill was wrong. *Very* wrong.

"There's something up on the hill!" He gasped, trying hard to regain his lost breath.

"The hill? How many times have I told you not to go up there? It is forbidden!" His father snapped angrily.

"I know, but there's something wrong up there!" Adraahn pleaded. "I am sorry for going against your rules, papa, but we need to get a sorcerer up there now!"

"You are thirteen years of age, and until you are a man, I will not tolerate such talk." He sighed as he stared down into the wide eyes of his son. "Before we send for Damarus the Grey, I will go up to Thieve's Hill and see for myself."

He playfully ruffled Adraahn's mane of brown hair and walked through the door, Thieve's Hill in mind.

Adraahn trailed behind his father, stepping more cautiously over protruding roots that pushed through

the old path that he'd just barreled down moments before. He didn't know if what he saw was still there or not, and he hoped it wasn't. A small part of him wished it will be, though. He didn't want to suffer the punishment for breaking the rules, and then telling lies to cover himself. Finally, the steep and un-even trail leveled out and the small trees, shrubbery and brambles thinned, leading out to the peak of the steep hill, a finely grassed dome bigger than Adraahn and his father's abode, with a flat, circular mosaic of grey and white stones that seemed to have black diamonds burned into the rough surface. Four large pillars constructed of the same stone rose up around it, giving it a distinct aura, one that leeched fear and wonderment into the body and soul of any who dared look upon it that were not of the magic circles. Within the large structure, a jagged line floated, energies crackling along it's length. It buzzed and snapped and the hues of a thousand colours shimmered through it. Adraahn gasped and came up short behind his father who had become statue still, staring at the tear.

"It's grown." Adraahn whispered.

Inside the tear, both fancied they could see through to other universes, and planes of realities.

"Go and get Damarus the Grey *now*." His father ordered. "I fear this does not bode well..."

Solstice

Galaxy clung onto the hull of the Solstice as it tumbled slowly through the darkness of space. She'd managed to get the others aboard to try and bring the engine's back online so they could stabilize it quicker, and more efficiently, rather than having the bulky Autobot clinging to it and trying to slow down the vessel's movements with her own power. Three hours had gone by, and she was very slowly and laborously succeeding, but any longer now, and she'd have to let go, her energy reserves depleted.

"*What's going on in there?*" She transmitted tiredly and adjusted her grip on the hull.

She stretched her right leg and let off a strong burst of fire, trying to correct the Solstice's position.

"*The secondary engine should be back online in five minutes.*" Flashpoint transmitted back.

A set of smaller gears and pistons flexed and rotated, and the main body of her primary wings moved into a position much like that of an Earth bird of prey coming into a hover.

"*Good.*" She replied. "*I dunno how much longer I can keep this up.*"

She adjusted her grip again and shuffled her way down the battered and dented hull, slowly making her way towards the fore of the ship. Once there, she gripped as hard as she could on the nose of the ship and employed as much force as she could muster to try and stop the nauseating rotating.

"*Got it!*" Flashpoint transmitted abruptly.

The whole ship gave a shudder and a lurch, and there was a silent explosion of white, halo'd with the palest of blues as the secondary engine came back to life. Galaxy let out a sigh of relief before gently pushing away from the hull and making for the nearest air lock. What she needed more than anything else right now, was rest. She couldn't function properly in her current state, so she'd have to fob her work load off on someone else. Gundog was the first to come to mind and she smiled slyly at the task she would elect for him. As she neared the lock, something tugged gently at her feet. Puzzled, she looked over her shoulder, optics scanning the emptiness around her. The tug doubled in strength and her hands shot forward, gripping the outer seal around the door to steady herself.

"*Let me in now!*" She transmitted hurriedly.

The door slid open and she heaved herself in. Once she was cut off from the vacuum of space, she listened carefully. There was the barest of noises just on the edge of sound, the sound of metal straining to stay together. The inner door opened with an aggravated hiss and Speeder looked at her as she sat awkwardly on the floor of the large chamber.

"You look terrible." He stated bluntly.

"I want you to run a scan on our surrounding area." Galaxy said sternly. "There's something not right here, and I don't want to find out what it is the hard way."

Speeder opted not to ask any questions incase it led to an argument of some form. He remembered the last argument he got into with the large female with a slight shudder. To this day, Flashpoint still insists on mocking him about it, as does everyone else who was present that day.

"I'll get right on it." He replied instead and promptly tried heaving his team mate to her feet.

Galaxy couldn't help but laugh when Speeder lost his grip on her and fell on his rear in the corridor.

"You need to work out, boy." She chuckled and rose unsteadily to her feet. "I'm gonna go get some rest. Tell Gundog he's on clean up after shift."

"If he removes my head for it, I'll be haunting you for the rest of your existence." Speeder replied as he started back for the bridge.

Cybertron

Flare scanned the scarred terrain below as it whipped past in a flurry of greys, silvers, blacks and blues. Burnout had asked her to scout ahead with a fellow rookie who was designated Demo. They'd heard rumours that the village of factionless bots was on the move and were heading north. There was also an electrical storm building.

"Found anything yet?" Demo asked as they slowed their pace slightly, realising that they were burning through more energy than they wished. Neither wanted to mess up on their first mission.

"Nothing yet." Flare replied, feeling slightly agitated. The build up of electricity in the atmosphere was making her armour tingle, something Demo seemed to enjoy, stating that it it 'tickled', but it did nothing more than annoy her, putting her off her task.

"Decepticons. You missed something." Burnout transmitted from somewhere behind.

"We did?" The pair asked in near unison.

Static hissed down the open com line.

"Let's go and find out what we missed." Demo suggested.

Flare agreed wordlesly and both the small jets banked hard and came in on their original path of flight. In the near distance, forked lightning burst from the dark sky and struck the metallic ground with an audio sensor shattering *CRACK*, which left their receptors buzzing unpleasantly.

"Where's Burnout?" Flare called after Demo, who was slowly starting to pull ahead again.

"What?!" He shouted back, audio receptors still buzzing.

Flare sighed and sped up to catch him. A dark blurr whisked by and Flare transformed mid-flight, spinning around to face the figure. Burnout hovered in vehicle mode just a short distance away. She could feel his grin. She looked at Demo, who had finally noticed she'd disappeared from his side and came up to hover by her.

"Look." Burnout said in the tones of a patient teacher who had suddenly found himself in a subject he truly relished in. "Down there, among that hill of debris. Do you see them?"

Both young Decepticons looked, optics focusing on the mess below. For a moment, neither saw anything but twisted and blackened metal. Then something moved. A slim metallic figure of reds, oranges and yellow. The factionless robot shouted something, then a large hand shot out from the debris and pulled him down. A surge of confusement entangled itself within Flare's mind. She recognised the figure. It was Solar. Within that instant, red sliced through the sky and slammed hard into the debris below. Another lightening strike and Burnout shouted over the din, trying to quell the sudden

reaction from the two young Decepticons.

"Stop fighting!" He roared and the pair separated mid-dive, coming back up to Burnout's side. "Demo: I will tell you when to strike." He said then transformed, panels sliding and rotating around a large bipedal figure, the rotar blades adjusting slightly so as to let Burnout stay airborne. Two red optics locked on Flare for an instant. "And you: Control yourself. Personal feelings have their own time and place for use, and that time and place is not on the battle field."

Flare stayed silent, but Demo couldn't help but vent his frustration.

"Why did you stop me?" He snapped angrily at Flare. "Those down there aren't worth anything. They're just taking up space and precious energy!"

Flare started to respond, equally as angry.

"Demo is right. They are worthless. They fight for no cause, and are therefore taking up space and energy that our army so desperately needs." Burnout rumbled, the small voice in the back of his mind relieved that none of the factionless bots had seen fit to launch an attack. "Now. Our mission as hunters is to seek out any runaways and Factionless and either destroy them or bring them in for processing. Understand?"

The pair nodded and voiced their agreements, albeit a touch reluctantly on Flare's part. Burnout made one last optical and radar sweep of the terrain below.

"Now you may proceed with the culling. Just remember the rules and I won't have to dismantle you." He stated, and all three swooped, dropping gracefully to the torn ground below, integrated weapons at the ready.

"Are you ready, Solar?" Contrail asked sternly.

Solar looked up at his elder and said nothing.

"She's still alive..." He mumbled numbly.

Contrail sighed and placed a massive hand on his shoulder.

"Yes. But she has been corrupted and thirsts for the Energon that flows through us. She seeks to extinguish our sparks."

"I don't want to fight this one." Solar said. "I'll help everyone get to safety."

Before he could run off, Contrail grabbed his wrist and pulled him back into place.

"This is a war, Solar. We get no say in who we want to fight and who we don't want to fight." He growled.

"I, and the others have helped train you for this kind of thing. We have nowhere to go right now, so until we fend off these Decepticons, we are cornered. Now; stand and fight, or flee and *die*."

Solar hesitated as he looked into the burning blue optics of his elder. Contrail was right. They were cornered, and if they didn't retaliate, they'd be easily crushed, especially if the three Decepticons had backed up not too far away. The electrical storm had started, flashes of lightning forking down and across the sky, the massive booms echoing across the wastes, a sound that reminded them of just how alone they really were. Then the red laser fire started up again, this time joined by more. Shouting erupted among the debris of what was once a trading tower and Contrail and Solar fled among the debris, scoping out the best vantage point. Over the duration of the couple of days they'd spent thusfar on the move, they'd lost several more, leaving them with just a handful of villagers, all of whom were now being cut down by the largest Decepticon. Solar looked away, focusing his attention elsewhere when the large Decepticon brought a pair of large, black blades down onto one of the villagers, slicing cleanly through the torso. The factionless bot's knees buckled as thick liquid trickled from the slick wound, leaving glowing trails of shimmering vivid pink. Blue optics flickered and torso finally separated from hips. The large Decepticon roared something unintelligible and moved swiftly onto the next victim.

Solar looked over the edge of a felled wall panel and spotted his sister fighting with a villager her own size. He watched as she knocked him down, foot planted firmly on his throat. He flailed, hands coming up to grip at her leg and heaved, dislodging her before she could shoot him in the head. She rolled and clambered neatly to her feet just in time to see a fist flying her way. She took the full force of the blow and hit the ground again. Solar slid down the side of the buckled metal sheet but took a shot to the shoulder, the sudden impact knocking him off kilter, forcing him to land awkwardly on the ground. He looked up. It had been Flare who had released the laser shot. Shock settled in and for a moment he couldn't do anything but watch as his sister beat an old comrade to death, her optics taking on a tinge of red as her anger fueled her fighting. Finally the villager fell and stayed down, unmoving. In one swift motion, Solar snapped out of his stupor and rolled to his feet, ignoring the pain in his shoulder where the shot had penetrated his flimsy armour and launched himself at his sister. He didn't want to take her offline permanently, just render her unconscious and see if he can persuade Wherry and Contrail to allow her back into the group. The sudden thought of what he was doing made itself known and he made a tiny miscalculation which left him wide open for a full frontal attack. Flare's full body landed heavily on him, knocking him down at an awkward angle. She landed a punch on his jaw and he grunted, trying to work his hands onto her shoulders to push her off.

"Flare!" He shouted pleadingly, "Wait! Why are you doing this?!"

Flare's snarled reply was lost in a sudden explosion, a tendril of lightning spitting down from above and slamming into the debris just off to their right, the force of it sending them rolling and tumbling down a steep bank of twisted metal. Both tried reclaiming their grip, but everything they grabbed ahold of either came loose or snapped. Flying was out of the question; the electrified explosion had been so close, it had knocked their propulsion systems offline, and both were in a state that didn't allow for much thought, especially since at the foot of the debris hill, lay a gnarled tear that pulsed with colourful energies.

"*BURNOUT!*" Flare shouted as the ground and the odd tear came up fast.

8 - Revelations

Epitaph

Having moved from the bridge, Jetstream now sat cross legged on the storage bay's floor amidst stacks of large, metal crates; a small, near flat device of deep green that had a scattering of well placed computer chips attached to it, an intricate webbing of fine, golden coloured wires gracing its flat surface held in one hand. In the other, she gingerly held a long, screw driver styled device, its tip glowing a vivid blue, and on the opposite tip, a thin, black wire snaked from it, connecting to the tip of her index finger. She nudged the glowing tip against the only chip she hadn't tested and probed, gently depressing a button that was situated halfway up its length. Having successfully retrieved and decoded the data clumps from the other five chips on the board, she hoped that this last one would give up the final piece of the little mystery she'd been put in charge of. A stream of tangled data surged into her processor and her metallic face went blank as she got to work, trying to untangle the new mess. She sat motionless in the storage bay for a further hour and a quarter as she worked, the constant low thrum of the Epitaph's engines being the only sound to be heard.

Once the newly retrieved data had been corrected, she arranged it alongside the other pieces of data to successfully form one long, data strand. She scanned through it, examine it all a new.

"Now, what's all this, then...?" She mumbled to herself.

She examined it in deeper detail and let out a bitter curse. Pulling the wire from her fingertip, she rose to her feet and stretched her limbs before replacing the computer board back inside the crate she'd pried open and made her way to the bridge. What she'd discovered was surprising, and would no doubt have the same effect on the other crew members. Krusher had a lot of explaining to do, she decided.

Muborthia

Damarus the Grey, a sorcerer of high rank, heavy robes and thick of beard stood atop Thieve's Hill, staring in disbelief at the ruins of the Circle Gate. Three of the tall pillars had been knocked down, the fourth smashed in half, but still standing. The stone dias the pillars ringed was badly cracked, as if something massive had landed heavily on it. Floating just off the ground in the middle of the wrecked pillars, was the tear. Damarus could feel the pull of energy, a tingling sensation crackling up and down his body as the magical field built up, growing stronger and stronger as the hours passed by. He took a deep breath and took another step closer, trying to ignore everything else around him, trying to ignore the shrieking calls of the worried birds, the cries of the forest animals, and more importantly, the mass of large, strange footprints that led off toward the trees that ringed the top of the Hill like a crown, ending in a large scorch mark. The only thing he concentrated on, was the tear. His eyes focused on it, peering into the void beyond, until his senses picked apart the visual static and rearranged it to form a picture. A rush of sounds accompanied the images and he gasped harshly, almost losing his balance and falling over. He blinked hard and scrubbed a hand across his face. He placed his shaking hand at chest height and cupped them. A single, whispered word drifted from his lips and he vanished from the Hill.

Malak, Adraahn's father, looked up abruptly from the kitchen table. Damarus the Grey had appeared, hands cupped at his chest, perspiration slicking his forehead. He looked paler than usual and looked terrified.

"Damarus?" Malak asked, rising from his chair at the table. "What is it?"

"I saw into the tear up on Thieve's Hill. And I saw Hell." Damarus rasped and gratefully landed in the chair Malak offered him.

"Hell?" Came a young voice from the stairs. Adraahn had appeared from his room and was fast descending the rickety staircase. "What was it like? Did you see any Demons?"

"Adraahn..." His father warned quietly as his son bounded over to the table and took up a seat at the far end.

"It was hideouse. A charred, twisted metal wasteland, lightning strikes all around, and the Demon... By the great God of Light, it was the most disturbing thing I have ever seen..." Damarus said, eyes glazed over as he recalled as much detail in his mind as he could manage. The two black skinned Humanoids looked on in silence. "It was a mass of dark spikes that glinted in the light of the lightning, and its red eyes pierced into my soul..."

There was a moment of silence, the only sounds being Damarus the Grey's laboured breathing and the crackling of the fire in the kitchen stove as it slowly boiled the night's supper.

"Has anything come out of the tear, do you know?" Malak finally asked, breaking the silence.

Damarus looked at him, having finally recovered himself.

"I'm afraid so, yes." He said grimly. "I counted two sets of odd tracks, both of which ended at the ring of trees at the top of the Hill with a large patch of scorched grass."

Malak swore bitterly. Damarus merely nodded his understanding.

"I will travel back to the Order tonight and arrange for the elders to prepare a ritual of sealing for this tear. I will have others search the area for any more of these tears."

"What about the Demons that are here? The ones that escaped through the tear?" Adraahn asked, obviously worried.

"A message will be sent to the king. But for now, I beg of you; do not go near the tear. I could feel it trying to pull me in when I was up there." The old Sorcerer warned sternly as he stood up, straightening his robes.

"We will keep watch on it from the attic window, using the looking glass. If anything else will venture through into this world, you will be summoned immediately." Malak said, as he too, rose from his seat, pulling his son up beside, as a show of respect to the higher order.

"Very well, but if another Demon does come through, stay put and don't risk your lives. I bid you farewell, Malak and Adraahn." Damarus said with a slight bow of his head.

Malak and Adraahn did the same, another show of respect, and Damarus the Grey cupped his hands at chest height again, said a single word and vanished once more.

Cybertron

Burnout and Demo landed in the main yard and swiftly transformed. The culling hadn't gone well, and neither had no idea what had happened.

"Crash is gonna bust a gasket!" Demo exclaimed unhappily.

"It was your first mission, so I should think you'll get off light about it. I was the one in charge. I should have kept a distance and kept watch..." Burnout growled, equally unhappy about the new situation.

The Decepticons on duty in the yard took a moment to look up from their current tasks to look at the two

bots. None said anything, but they all kept their distance, even Demo was trailing behind the highly agitated Burnout.

"Go find a job to occupy yourself with." The massive Decepticon ordered flatly as a set of large, black doors opened on the front of the main building.

Demo wordlessly turned and walked off in the direction of the storage hangars, leaving Burnout standing at the mouth of the main building. The guards either side of the door looked curiously at him. Burnout shrugged off the stares and strode into the dim light beyond, where he would no doubt find Crash lurking. He strode forward and started working his way to the core of the main building, where all the orders were received from high command and given out. If Crash was going to be anywhere, it would most likely be there.

Burnout stepped onto an elevator and ascended, the multiple floors of the complex sweeping down in a blur before him as he stared out the see-through front. The lift squealed to a halt, and Burnout stepped off as the glassy doors parted. The core room was almost empty. Only three Decepticons manned the stations, and Crash was stood in front of the large vid screen, fists clenched. This did not bode well.

"Sir?" Burnout rumbled.

Crash didn't turn around.

"How did the culling go?" He asked blankly.

"Only two remain alive, but they escaped." Burnout said. Crash remained silent, waiting for his old companion to continue. "Only myself and Demo made it back."

Crash finally turned to face Burnout.

"What happened?" He asked.

"Flare was fighting her brother, and they suffered a fall. But they didn't land..." He said hesitantly. "... It's like they fell through the ground."

"They fell through the ground?"

"Yes. I went to investigate when I heard her shout, and all I saw was some kind of a portal, like a tear in space. She must've fell through that with her factionless brother."

Crash thought a moment. "Did you see anything in this 'portal'?"

Burnout gave a quick nod and stepped closer.

"I saw an organic. He looked old and fragile, and the world around him fertile. And most of all, he looked *frightened*." The large Decepticon rumbled, the final word hanging in the air like oil floats on the surface of water.

"Then Flare and the Factionless one must be on that world. Assuming they didn't hit anything during their unexpected transit. Like a blackhole..."

"What do we do?"

"Take Propshaft and investigate this *portal* further, assuming it's still there. Afterward, I want a full report on it, and maybe I can get permission to go through to retrieve our missing comrade." The corners of his metallic mouth tilted slightly in a sly grin. "We may find this new world of use to us, if it's still there, or if it's even real."

"I will go collect him immediately and whatever equipment he may need."

"Burnout; try not to be late back. We have a visitor dropping by at nineteen hundred today."

"Yessir." Burnout rumbled, sketched a deft salute and went off in search of Propshaft.

Solstice

Speeder stared at his screen. The readings he was getting appeared as a jumbled mass of incoherent data, and he was having difficulty deciphering it all. Blue Falcon gave him a look.

"Problems?" He queried.

Speeder hesitated a moment.

"Uh, not quite sure yet, hang on..." He replied slowly and tapped something into the computer. The readings came up more clearly, or at least in a sense that he could read them and understand what was coming up on the small screen. "Oh... Just a small one, yes. Bossbot Raid?" He said, rotating his chair so he was facing the large tank who was sat in the command chair, plugged into the Optic Visualiser. Raid looked at Speeder directly, but saw him from a different angle through one of the ship's on board sensors.

"What's the matter, Speeder?" He asked.

"I think I've found out what was causing Galaxy grief when she was outside." He said. He suddenly felt the optics of Deadmetal and Gundog on him. "It's some kind of spacial disturbance, and it's grown in strength in the past few minutes."

"Does Flashpoint know about this disturbance?" Raid asked.

Speeder shrugged as best he could with his police cruiser armour still intact.

"If he hasn't noticed it by now, then there's something wrong with him." Deadmetal put in.

"I've only been hanging around with you guys for a short period of time, but that's long enough to realise that very little gets past Flashpoint." Gundog added from his spot in the cubby hole.

"Patch your findings through to him," Raid ordered, "he may be able to study it further."

"Will do, boss." Speeder agreed and turned back to his station, as did everybody else.

This should keep him amused for a while... Speeder mused as he sent the data he'd gathered from the Solstice's various sensors to Flashpoint's lab computer.

9 - Seranta 3

Epitaph

Jetstream looked from metallic face to metallic face, each expression ranging from the curious to the bored. Krusher sat in the command chair, staring at her intently with mild intrigue.

"Well?" He asked, almost impatiently.

"Well," She continued, "after muddling through all seventeen crates, I finally found the piece I was looking for. I downloaded the data from each memory chip and decoded what they held." She smiled a rather unpleasant metal smile. "I've discovered something *very* interesting."

"What, that we're all bored and want to go home?" Roadtrain snapped rather irritably.

"Yeah, c'mon Jet, that teleport modulator formed one of the vital components of our Transwarp Drivers." Steele said tiredly.

"Well, you're in luck, because I know who stole it." She replied pleasantly, looking directly at the worn Constructicon.

"Who?" Krusher grumbled, fast getting bored of the ego show Jetstream was putting on.

"Turbulence." She replied simply and evenly.

Silence gripped the bridge of the Epitaph for a few moments, the only sounds being the quiet and thoughtful beeping of the scanning instruments and the low, near monotonous thrumming of the powerfull engines.

"Turbulence is dead." Krusher snapped, sitting upright and glaring.

"According to our dear Space Bridge, he's not, and before you start, I have never known a glitch like this occur in this particular Bridge system. It's ninety - seven percent error proof, so that leaves you very little wriggle room, *sir*." She replied coolly.

"I wanna see this data for myself." Roadtrain growled angrily, displeased by the news.

Jetstream turned her back on Krusher, an unwise move, but something she'd done many times before. He wouldn't dare destroy her, she knew that much. She's too valuable to him, a multi - tasker of good skill.

Krusher growled and rose from his seat, massive fists clenched in anger, optics glowing vivid red.

Jetstream produced a small disc from her right wrist and tossed it to Roadtrain, who caught it neatly in one hand.

"Had things thrown at you before, ain'tcha?" She joked lightly.

"One too many times, and sometimes the object's been larger than myself." He replied, flipping the silvery blue disc in his fingers and slotting it into his console interface.

Words and coding streamed onto his main screen a line at a time, scrolling up and up until it eventually came to an end. The transformed KAMAZ looked up from his screen only to find that Steele, Hookshot and Krusher had gathered to have a look. Jetstream was stood where she had been when she tossed the disc to Roadtrain, her arms folded across her chest, her silver metal plated features locked in a look of distaste.

"What went wrong?" She asked. "Were you to have him killed once you'd outcasted him, but you're little head hunters didn't like the pay? I'm waiting for the excuse."

Krusher growled, his patience on the verge of snapping.

"Krusher, sir-"

"Don't start, Hookshot." He growled angrily.

"Do you care to explain what *really* happened? Or just spin another lie?" Roadtrain provoked.

Krusher's massive hand came down on the transporter and the Constructicons scattered reflexively as the large Decepticon's fingers gripped around their smaller comrade's neck. An electronic sounding gargle and a crackle of audio static sounded from what passed as Roadtrain's mouth and his hands shot up, one gripping Krusher's wrist, the other trying to pry his thick fingers from around his neck before any serious damage could be done. Krusher gave a sharp squeeze and quickly pushed Roadtrain backwards, out of his seat.

"He was just voicing what the rest of us was thinking!" Hookshot retorted as he helped Roadtrain pull himself to his feet.

"What is this? Mutiny?" Krusher rumbled angrily as he scanned the room, optics focusing on each of the Decepticons.

"It will be if you don't tell us the truth." Jetstream said calmly. "Turbulence was a good soldier, and loyal too, which is a growing rarity among the Decepticon ranks. All we want to know is what really happened."

"Spill the bolts, slag pile, or we'll maroon you." Roadtrain grinned cruelly, suddenly enjoying the situation, no matter how painful it got.

Krusher roared something in a foreign language and launched himself at Roadtrain, who readied himself for the inevitable impact. Krusher's fist came up, but he was knocked off balance before he could land the blow properly, Hookshot's crane wire and hook wrapping around his torso like a lasso and yanking him to one side. The mis-guided punch still sent shockwaves of pain through Roadtrain as his chest armour caved in, pushing hard against the sensitive circuitry beneath, and sent him backwards, halfway across the bridge.

Steele hurried after his stricken friend while Hookshot and Krusher wrestled on the floor. Both were immediately stopped by a paralyzing hit from a carefully charged EMP shot.

"When you get full use of your body again, I will expect you to have calmed down. Until then, you can stay on the floor." Jetstream said calmly as her EMP gun re-intergrated with her arm.

"Whut 'bout me?" Hookshot mumbled through his temporary paralysis.

"Sorry, mate. You'll just have to put up with it." Jetstream shrugged helplessly, genuinely sorry.

She wandered over to Roadtrain who was sat in an awkward upright position, gingerly fingering the massing dent in his chest armour with a light wince. Steele and Roadtrain looked at Jetstream.

"Right, Steele. From what I've heard, and what I've read in the personnel files, you're the closest thing we have left to a medic. I'm leaving Roadtrain in your care, so bring him back up to spec, kay?" She said.

"Eh?!" Roadtrain grunted in mild shock, wincing slightly from the crackling of his vocal processor.

"Steele? A medic? *Caring?!!*"

"HEY! I trained to be a medic before I signed up for the army. The construction thing was just a fail safe, incase I didn't make it." Steele retorted hotly.

"And did you make it..?" Roadtrain provoked slowly, trying to seem inconspicuous in his pained movements as he tried to edge slowly away from the Constructicon.

"Failed one thing."

"What was that?" Jetstream asked curiously.

"Processor Surgery. I could tell you the ins and outs of a class three war cruiser engine, but not the ins

and out of a bots' processor."

"Remind me to never gain any serious head injuries unless there's a fully qualified doc in the area.

That's on our side." Roadtrain grumbled a little uncertainly.

"Then I suggest you stop winding Krusher up." Jetstream warned.

"I can't help it. It's the Decepticon in me! He's just such a large target!" Roadtrain complained in a near whine.

Jetstream sighed. Steele laughed.

"Get to the medi bay and get fixed. I want everyone present for Krusher's explanation." She said sternly.

"I hate repeating myself..." She added in a grumble and turned, taking up position in the command chair.

Krusher glared at her from the floor. Jetstream was a good intel officer and a fine second in command, but now he remembered the reason why he didn't miss her company. She was ruthless, even more so than himself, sometimes.

Solstice

Flashpoint stared hard. The readings on his console's monitor was fluctuating like he'd never seen before, giving out readings that he knew, somehow, shouldn't exist without the aid of some object designed for instantaneous long distance travel.

"Hmmm...." He said thoughtfully. "Very interesting..."

"What is it?" Raid asked, looking blindly at the point just above Flashpoint's head as the medic poured over the data.

"Our Transwarp Drivers haven't come back online for any mysterious reason, have they?"

"No. The damage from the mines short circuited them beyond a quick fix. Speeder and Gundog are still working on them." Raid replied evenly.

"Hmmm, then I believe we may have a slight problem." Flashpoint said, bringing himself to his full height again. "Or it could be a chance to learn about a new spacial anomaly."

Raid nodded slowly.

"From the readings you've been sending me, I can see why you'd want a closer look at it. What ever it is, is throwing out a large amount of energy."

"And it's growing in strength as we speak." Flashpoint put in.

"Yes, I had noticed that." Raid replied. "And I know what you're thinking. We're low on power, but do you have anything to store the energy in? Would it even be compatible with our systems?"

"I'm pretty sure I *can* store the energy somehow, but as for seeing if it's compatible with the ship, well... I dunno. I'm not quite sure yet. I've tried breaking down the data further, to see if the base molecules are like the base molecules in Energon, but so far, I've had very little luck with it. I can only do so much with a computer." Flashpoint explained.

Raid thought a moment. He didn't much care for the idea of going for a walk outside, especially with an unrecognised anomaly in the vicinity. He sighed.

"Ask Galaxy and Deadmetal to go with you. I don't want you floating off or getting sucked into that thing, whatever it is." He finally said.

"You're asking me to not get into trouble, yet you're sending Dee our with me?" Flashpoint grinned.

Raid didn't need his vision to be able to know when Flashpoint was smiling. He could hear it in his voice.

"Galaxy keeps you out of trouble, you keep Deadmetal out of trouble, and the pair of them keep you from floating off."

"Yeah, I know the drill, bossbot." He replied. "I'll be heading out in thirty."

"I'll be watching, but keep me posted."

"Naturally."

Seranta 3 - Planet

"You can't be serious?!" Turbulance almost shouted.

Bandit sat opposite him behind a badly constructed desk, feet up on its flat surface, leaning back in her chair as she eyed her fellow Decepticon closely. A worn silver washer clicked metallically as it was flicked from one finger, to another and back again.

"I am." She replied calmly. "He paid a nice price for it too. Three hundred Da'lahs."

Turbulance could feel the proverbial hole of doom slowly opening up beneath him. Without that teleport modulator, he wouldn't be able to acquire the coordinates for the Epitaph's whereabouts, and without that knowledge, as insignificant as it may seem to most, he wouldn't be able to get one up on Krusher, his long time boss, and suddenly acquired enemy.

"What in the name of Primus, are you going to do with all that money?!"

Bandit made a small show of hard thinking. "Buy some stuff legit." She said eventually. "Then sell it on."

Turbulance tried hard not to gape.

"What? Doesn't hurt to do a bit of legal business every now and then. Helps keep the authorities away." She said.

"I think you're forgetting that you're bigger than most, if not *all* of the authorities around these parts."

"True, but still. I hate having insects buzzing around my head." She said easily then dropped her feet to the floor with a metallic *clack*.

She pulled herself upright and leaned on the table, placing the washer neatly to one side. "Anything else I can do for you? Or is this just a fly-by visit now?"

Turbulance looked around at the large space. It was a dark grotto carved in the base of an old coastal cliff. The ocean was fast drying up, so there was no risk of being flooded out, so Bandit's stock and equipment was strewn about, placed in their own little categories. Along one shelf that was built into the grotto wall near the entrance, was a chaotic, yet neatly assorted line of weapon holsters, ranging from the tiny, to the down right huge that were meant to be worn by races as big as the Cybertronians themselves. Stacked in a pile to one side, there was a mass of metal plating that had been scavenged from space faring ships of all origins. The organised chaos continued even behind her makeshift desk, with a pile of what appeared to be old computers. The whole grotto was dimly lit by the odd wall light placed here and there.

Turbulance sighed. He felt the will to live fast evading him.

"Can you tell me where this customer of yours is?" He asked as politely as he could manage.

"No." Bandit replied, not missing a beat.

"Not even for a trade...?" Turbulance forced. There was only one thing he was - grudgingly - willing to part with.

Bandit seemed to perk up.

"What kind of trade...?" She asked cautiously.

"My pulse cannon, for this guy's whereabouts." He said.

"Hmm..." She said slowly. "Is it in good condition?"

The cannon in question formed itself on his forearm and he leaned across the desk so she could inspect it closely.

"Good condition. You look after your weapons, I see. That's always a good sign of a good customer." She said.

"Do we have a deal?" He asked, sitting back in his own chair.

"Yeah. It'd be a nice addition to my collection and would fetch a pretty penny or six." She smiled.

Turbulance sighed and grimly set about prying the intergrated pulse cannon from his left fore arm. He winced as the wires came free with an audible snap. One last look at it, and he handed it over to the Cybertronian trader. He couldn't help but notice that his arm now felt horribly lighter. He watched as Bandit inspected it one last time before tossing it onto a heap of of other assorted weapons awaiting for sorting and display.

"His name's Salavar and he's from the south. About three hundred miles south, an hour's flight at cruisin' speed. Tall, gangly looking organic with big ol' bloodshot eyes and bright orange hair. Lives in a descent sized house with wooden roof and a yard full of animals. You'll know him when you see him. He likes shiny stuff."

10 - Goose Chase

Solstice

Attached by a thick, wire tether to the bulky dark green and fiery orange figure of Galaxy, Flashpoint floated, a small, computer like device in one hand. Deadmetal also floated in free space near by, keeping a close tabs on the goings on. Whatever was here, the force of it was getting stronger and stronger, tugging more and more urgently at their bodies.

"Any clue on what it is?" Galaxy rumbled curiously.

Her transmission mildly startled Flashpoint who was deep in thought, staring at the small screen that his miniature computer had.

"I think, from these readings, that it's a tear in space...." He replied slowly. *"But I'm not one hundred percent sure."*

"Well, whatever it is, it better not be lethal or irriversable, because I can feel it getting stronger."

Deadmetal put in.

Flashpoint nodded slowly. The supposed portal was indeed growing in strength, having tripled in intensity since they left the Solstice, which was floating just seventy yards behind them.

Flashpoint was about to add something else to the budding debate when there was a soft, almost electric sounding *pop* from somewhere in front of them. They looked curiously at the empty space. Then it happened again. *Pop*. A tiny vivid white spot exploded, like a miniature firework. Then there was another, this one a slightly different colour, then more. The noise grew into a static din, then space seemed to split open before them. Galaxy yanked hard on the tether, pulling Flashpoint towards her. He was almost close to her when she started being pulled toward him. Deadmetal saw the pair slowly starting toward the tear and circled around behind Galaxy, who had her thrusters on full, tugging frantically at the tether that bound her to Flashpoint.

Deadmetal grabbed ahold of one of Galaxy's wings and heaved. He felt himself moving forward instead of backward.

"Raid?!" Galaxy transmitted, feeling panic setting in.

Raid rose from the command chair, the thin wires connecting him to the ship's sensors trailing after him. He was watching through the fore scanners with mounting dismay. Something had ripped space open, and what lay beyond appeared to be organic. He couldn't be sure. The tear was rippling and merging from colour to colour like a hyper active Chameleon.

"Gundog, Falcon, get out there, and help!" He ordered.

Blue Falcon was already halfway to the door of the bridge before the order was even voiced, rotar blades splitting from car doors as he activated his second alternate mode of transformation, that of an all blue AH-1W Super Cobra. Gundog ran after him, albeit a touch grudgingly. He didn't feel indebted to these Autobots in any way, and held a mild dislike for the ever eager Blue Falcon. Still, the Solstice was his only way back to Cybertron, so he'd decided to shelve his pride and follow Raid's orders.

Launching from the nearest air lock, they drifted away from the Solstice then engaged their propulsion drives, propelling themselves toward the struggling trio. As they closed the distance between themselves and Galaxy, Flashpoint and Deadmetal, they slowed slightly. The pull was stronger than they'd first anticipated. Both carefully came up behind Galaxy, grabbing her other wing and heaving. Galaxy

continued to pull at the tether, but the strain it was being put under frayed it, thin strips of wire twanging apart, the horrible, damning sounds of snapping cable being devoured by space. Flashpoint looked up the length of the tether, his gaze lingering for a brief moment on the fast weakening area of flexible metal. Then his optics locked with Galaxy's. The tether snapped, both ends being flung upward, rearing like snakes as the tension was broken. Flashpoint fell toward the odd tear, the din the only thing he could hear over the open communications line. Galaxy shot forward, throwing the others off of her with a shout, sending them rolling in all directions as she went for the fast receding figure of Flashpoint. "GALAXY!" Deadmetal shouted angrily over the com line.

She ignored him.

"Stubborn slugging female Autobot--!" The transformed Apache growled.

The three righted themselves and watched as Galaxy made a last ditch attempt at saving Flashpoint. Time seemed to go horribly slow, nearly grinding to a halt as they watched. The tear fizzed angrily as Flashpoint was swallowed by it. Then Galaxy vanished through it too.

"Get back to the ship." Deadmetal transmitted flatly before turning back for the ship with the others in tow, trying hard to ignore the tugging at his feet.

Seranta 3

The rocky terrain whipped by beneath him in a blur of greys and greens. Scanners stretching as far as he could make them go, he was searching for the small, wood roofed house the trader Decepticon Bandit had mentioned. If such a house existed, he hoped to find the organic known as Salavar residing there. If the information turned out to be false, and he had been sent on a wild Goose chase, then he'd have some dismantling to do. Just on the edge of hearing, as he was starting to lose hope or ever acquiring those dear coordinates, Turbulance's strong audio receptors picked up the sounds of animals, winnying and crowing. He slowed his pace and started a gentle descent. Below, the rocky terrain was evening out into a lush, meadow styled terrain; velvety green, fertile slopes rolling off into the distance to join with the monolithic mountains that hemmed the distant horizon. As he continued to adjust his speed and height, a small stone cabin with a deep brown wooden roof came into view. Smoke was billowing out of the chimney, too, signifying some kind of life was inside. Turbulance orbited wide around the cabin, wings folding back, nose cone and cockpit pulling down, revealing his head. He landed feet first, going into a partial crouch as he touched down, the terrain softer beneath his metallic feet than he had expected. He pulled himself to his full height and looked around. No one. The meadow was empty, except for this one little house with it's small cluster of animals that were kept in a single wood fenced pen to the rear of the abode. He contemplated the best way to approach the organic, Salavar.

Carefully approaching the old cabin, he ducked down before the front porch. He mentally kicked himself for what he was about to do, and silently prayed to all those he could think of, including Primus himself, that no one would ever find out about this particular moment. Being nice and civil wasn't one of his strong points. Reaching a large hand out, he tapped as gently as he could possibly manage on the carved, wooden door, leaving a slight indentation in the wood where his little finger had made contact with the hinged divider. He looked over his shoulder again. Still no one around to see this demeaning and humilliating act. The brass knob on the door twisted and rattled slightly and the door was pulled open. The tall, spindly figure of whom Turbulance assumed to be Salavar, stood with a toothpick working between his teeth. The toothpick promptly fell to the planked floor and the door slammed shut again. There was the sound of bolts and locks being put in place just beyond the door, and Turbulance sighed. This usually happened when he tried being polite. People generally got scared and ran.

"Salavar?" He rumbled in his best Serantanian.

There was no reply. Salavar was now firmly tucked under his kitchen table, triple barrelled gun firmly in his grasp.

"We need to discuss something." Turbulance said as politely as he could, yet it still ended up sounding like a threat.

Still no reply.

"You have something of mine, that I dearly need back."

More silence.

"Don't make me rip your pitiful house apart." He growled.

When no reply came, he rose to his full height again, gripped either side of the wooden roof and effortlessly tore it from its fastenings, sending some of the oddly shaped grey stones it was constructed on scattering and rolling to the ground below with several dull thuds and several more sounding like they smashed into something priceless within the house itself. Turbulance looked down into the house, as the dust swirled, slowly settling. Through the cloudy mess, he could see Salavar, looking up at him, eyes wide, his long, narrow, triple barrel gun clutched firmly in his hands. A couple of stones had smashed his kitchen table to bits upon the removal of the roof, leaving the organic in plain sight.

"You'll never take me alive, robot!" Salavar howled angrily.

Three barrels of buckshot bounced harmlessly off of Turbulance's bored metallic features with a bang and a series of tiny metallic clangs, the recoil from the gun being so hard, it sent Salavar rolling backwards across his damaged, wooden kitchen floor.

"When you're quite done, *fleshling*," Turbulance rumbled irritably, "I would like to discuss business with you."

"I'll drag you to the deepest depths of hell wi-- What?" Salavar blinked, slowly lowering his empty gun. He lay, half sprawled, half sat, on the battered floor of his small kitchen area, now looking decidedly puzzled. Two large, red optics focused on him, as Turbulance loomed over his house, almost blocking out the afternoon sun.

"You acquired a mechanical device from a trader of my race a few days ago, did you not?" The now relatively, and temporarily calm, Decepticon inquired as politely as he could.

Salavar stared a moment, a slight vacant look glazing his features over.

"*Well?*" Turbulance snapped. "Did you, or did you not? It isn't a difficult question."

"Yes. I did. Why is it any of your business?" Salavar said, suddenly snapping out of his train of thought.

"Because that piece of equipment was stolen from me and it is very important to me, so I would like it back." Turbulance lied.

"Not what that robot trader said." Salavar countered.

Turbulance bristled, then promptly brought his temper back under control. Now was not the time to be crushing a customer of a reliable source of goods, no matter how enraged you became with him.

"You can't trust *everything* Bandit says." He grunted peevishly. "Now tell me, what have you done with it?"

"I sold it on." He replied simply, pulling himself upright.

"..... You *what?*!" Turbulance snarled and leaned down, now completely blocking the sun out.

Salavar shrank back slightly.

"It wasn't compatible with what I was intending to use it for!" Salavar defended.

A large, metallic black hand dropped into the house, and Salavar suddenly found himself in the vice like grip of Turbulance, the rickety floor of his half destroyed house now some feet below him.

"Tell me what you did with it, and I may just spare you your life!" Turbulance growled, his grey face and burning red optics the only thing Salavar could see.

"A traveller! He said he was going over the ridge!" He made a nodding motion in the direction of the mountains that bordered the horizon, abruptly cutting the vast expanse of velvet greenery off.

"What traveller?"

"Big bloke, fronts the land train! You can't miss him!" Salavar replied, panic quickly setting in. "He's taking the Monolith pass, it's a common trade route!"

"If you're lying about this, running away will not work. I will come back for you and show you just how slagged off I can really get!"

Turbulance tossed the odd man aside, and jumped forward over the house, wings and panels sliding into place as twin black flames erupted from his after burners, propelling him forward, towards the mountains with a roaring scream of alien engine. Salavar looked up from the blessed mud pool he'd landed in, an ugly pig like creature nuzzling at his hips. He watched Turbulance fly off, then looked at his pig. His body hurt, possibly a broken bone judging by the agony in his wrist, but he was still alive. For now, anyway...

Solstice

"I can go in after them." Blue Falcon volunteered.

"No." Raid replied simply and calmly.

"We could always tie him up to a tether and lower him in, like the Humans did when they went exploring caves back on Earth." Gundog prompted.

"I swear you're more Decepticon than Autobot." Deadmetal grumbled, casting a quick look in Gundog's general direction.

Gundog just chuckled.

"I kid, I kid. Right now, we need all the bot power we can get now we're down on two crewmen." He said.

"How about a probe or something...?" Speeder piped up.

He'd been unusually quiet since the latch mine incident, instead focusing all his energy on repairing instead of chatting and sparring.

"Weren't Flash working on repairing the long distance probe?" Deadmetal asked, hopefulness edging his otherwise grim tone.

"I think so." Blue Falcon said. "I could swear I nearly tripped over it when I last went in his lab."

Raid's optics seemed to take on a pale hue of blue as he tapped into the security system in Flashpoint's lab - cum - medic bay. A small, well concealed camera that was tucked away above the secondary repair bed swivelled around, searching the room. It didn't take many seconds for him to locate said item.

There, in the corner half buried amongst coils of wiring, a couple of sheets of metal and a box of bolts and other smaller pieces of mechanical interest, medicinal or otherwise, lay the long distance probe.

One of the panels appeared to be open, revealing a mass of internal circuitry, wiring and thin pipes.

"Speeder, Falcon, the LDP is tucked away in the corner of the medi bay. Go get it and fix it up. Let me know when you've completed it's repair." Raid ordered and re-seated himself in his command chair.

Speeder and Blue Falcon hurried off to Flashpoint's lab to finish his repair job for him. Hopefully, the plan they had in mind, would work.

Deadmetal and Gundog got back to their own stations and got back to work, watching and studying the odd tear. It was still growing in strength and had started rippling and changing colours more quickly than before.

A few moments passed, then Speeder opened the in-ship com line.

"The LDP's ready for launch. All the systems are checking out good on the equipment down here, so it should do its job once outside." He said, triumph underscoring his calm tone. "It was an easy fix. Only a few of the wires were unhooked." He added.

"Good." Raid transmitted back through the open line.

"Launch tube three is now fully operational." Deadmetal said from his position at the fore of the bridge.

"We're on way now. Prepare for the launch." Speeder replied then there was a quiet click as the line was terminated.

"Certainly hope it does work." Gundog muttered.

Deadmetal looked over in his direction. Gundog gave a light shrug.

"If it doesn't, then it'll be mighty quiet without Galaxy's short temper and Flashpoint's ever confusing repair work.

"True that.." Deadmetal replied.

It appeared that the seemingly uptight Gundog was finally slowly warming up to the fire engine and space shuttle's personalities.

"We're ready for launch!" Blue Falcon announced over the in-ship com line. "The LDP is now in the launch tube and all Autobots are clear."

"Aim for the center of the tear. We don't know if touching the edges of that thing will tear the probe up, and it could be our only chance to get a better look beyond it." Raid said.

Deadmetal set about adjusting the Solstice's position as Gundog got a target lock on the tear.

"Ready when you are." The Bell UH-1C announced from his cubby hole to the right of the bridge.

"*Fire!*" Raid announced, desperation and anticipation hanging from the word as he said it. Now was not the right time to make a mistake, no matter how tiny.

From somewhere below the bridge, the LDP was launched into space, the spherical, grey and red probe hurtling toward the shimmering tear in the dark. Silence coursed through the Solstice as all watched the probe fly further and further away from the ship. Then the tear danced, shining brightly as the probe vanished through it, dead center.

"We've got contact with the LDP." Deadmetal announced.

"Launch tube three is still intact. All systems functional." Gundog stated flatly before turning his attentions to the screens and instrumentation to his left. "LDP radar shows organic terrain."

"Atmospheric conditions appear to be able to sustain life forms."

"What's the distance from here to that world?"

There was a moment of silence then Speeder appeared on the bridge, Blue Falcon trailing behind him. Both promptly took up their stations and got to work.

"Distance? Oh, Primus..." Speeder muttered.

The others looked at the data. There was a sinking feeling all around.

11 - Coordinates

Muborthia - Nordar Plains

Flare looked at her surroundings one last time. She'd lost her brother in the clouds, the task made all the easier due to the static that fizzed throughout their systems from the sudden transportation. The young Cybertronian now sat hunched in a large cave mouth, over looking the plains of vibrant greenery that stretched for miles and miles, eventually tapering out into a series of water logged valleys. The sky was clouding over; thick, blue grey clouds of which she hadn't seen before. She had no idea what rain was. The only storms that happened on Cybertron were winds and electrical storms. Nothing wet ever fell from the sky. But here, the wet was coming from the sky, and she didn't much know how to react to it, instead just taking shelter like she would with any other storm she'd experienced in her short life time. She looked on, through the growing rain, the fine water droplets that fell from the clouds creating something of a fine mist. She was still working on bringing her personal communications system back online, the transition from Cybertron to this unknown, strange world having knocked it offline. She hoped that once she'd repaired any possible damage that she get ahold of Burnout. "Hell, right now, I'd even settle for Demo." She grumbled sourly to herself.

She took a moment's break from her internal fiddlings when a strange creature landed on the rock just a few feet away from her. It looked at her with inquisitive, silver eyes, its feathery royal blue crest flicking forward. It ruffled its dark feathers, clicked its beak once and spread its large wings and took off again. Flare watched it with interest. The fact that such a creature was capable of flying without any kind of propulsion systems was beyond her. She shook her thoughts aside, and got back to work, sorting out her communications problem.

Muborthia - Enriss Plateau

Solar landed on the edge of a shallow canyon and looked around. There was no sign of life, or none that he could pick up on his scanning systems, anyway. Dark blue storm clouds were rolling in, descending on the land to obscure the view. No matter. Solar's optics were powerful, picking up many different objects through the haze as he scanned through the ordinary way of seeing to the infrared. There were tiny heat signatures bouncing about at the ground level he was stood on on the opposite side of the canyon. Then another, much larger shape swooped from the clouds, grabbed one of the smallest heat signatures and rocketed back into the clouds again. He heard the shrill scream of something non-mechanical as it happened. He looked on in interest as the other ground based heat signatures scurried and bounded off in various different directions, disappearing swiftly into the ground. There was a shrill, organic cry of victory from somewhere over head.

This was a strange world, one he never knew could possibly exist. Of course, he'd heard of fellow Cybertronians travelling beyond Cybertron and exploring the other worlds that hung in the blackness of space, and returning with tales of weird and wonderful creatures, some willing to share their knowledge and culture, and others being openly hostile. He didn't actually know if these were just made up or not, and had doubted his elders on the subject. Now he was on an alien planet himself. Was it hostile or

otherwise? The thought worried him. He was alone, lost, possibly millions of lightyears away from home with no way of getting back. And his sister was still here somewhere too. He had to find her, persuade her to leave the Decepticon ranks and return to the village they grew up with. A task easier said than done, since he had no idea how many had survived the last attack or what story the Decepticons had spun for her. He found himself staring off into the distance, fists clenched. Standing here wouldn't get anything done. He looked around at his current surroundings again. The denizens of this world couldn't be that big. Not after watching the tiny heat signatures. Hostile or not, he had a feeling he'd be able to survive long enough to at least secure a small alliance with any organics he came across. Someone out there had to be willing to help.

Muborthia - Sorcerer's Isle

Damarus the Grey looked at his fellow magic crafters, who in turn returned his haggard and worried gaze. They'd discovered several tears, the most recent having appeared on their isle within a small cluster of trees close to the shore.

"Shall we attempt to seal this one off first before we move onto the tear of Thieve's Hill?" A stout, well rounded, red haired Sorcerer asked.

"Yes. If we do not seal it now, then who knows what other monstrosities will come through?" Damarus replied evenly.

The five Sorcerers mumbled agreement and formed a circle around the tear as it spat and fizzed from colour to colour. It was still young, and all that could be seen within it was a blackness dappled with white.

"Prepare yourselves, Brothers!" Damarus the Grey ordered.

The others raised their hands high, fingers fanned, eyes lidded. A low, thrum of words filled the air, slowly turning, and encroaching on the tear, which seemed to flex in the air as the Sorcery started to take hold. A fine mist of blues, silvers, golds, reds and greens swirled from the palms of the sorcerers, flowing around the rippling, agitated tear, creating a bubble of marbled colours around it. The chanting reached a crescendo, and suddenly the bubble of colours expanded. An explosion of colour and neutralised magic washed outwards, like a tidal wave, knocking all five Sorcerers off their feet. There was a loud roar then silence. Blissful silence. Damarus lay still in the thick grass and moss, staring up through the trees and at the blue sky. He blinked hard and stiffly brought himself into a sitting position. He looked around, the buzzing in his ears now dying off. The others were sorting themselves out, sitting upright, straightening their robes and dusting themselves off. Each face contained much the same expression; Confusion.

"What just happened?" Asked the Sorcerer in the green robes.

"The tear, as Caton the Silver suggested, was indeed constructed of raw magic." Damarus said, rubbing the side of his head.

"It appears that our Sphere of Order agitated the tear enough to make it collapse in on itself, therefore, forcing some of its magic outward, much like what would occur when one drops a large rock into a small pond." Caton said, as he rose a touch unsteadily to his feet. "If you are still feeling strong enough, Brothers, shall we teleport to the first tear, up on Thieve's Hill?"

"Yes. I would like to see these tracks that Damarus spoke of." The Sorcerer in the Blue robes said.

"Yankara speaks of my intrigue too." Nuri of the Earth said, dusting off his long green tabard and robe as he stood. "I'd like to investigate these tracks further."

"Aclomixti? Are you well enough to travel and perform the same magics again?" Damarus the Grey

asked, eyeing up the quiet golden robed Sorcerer.

Aclomixti nodded. "Yes. I was just mentally preparing myself incase these Demons should make an appearance." He said sagely.

"A wise decision." Damarus agreed.

After a moment's pause for thought gathering, all Sorcerers cupped their hands at chest height and said a single word. Then they vanished.

Muborthia - Liu'sana Plains

Galaxy picked Flashpoint up and set him back on his feet. He shook his head lightly and looked over his shoulder at the large, deep green and fiery orange female Autobot. She looked at him curiously.

"I'm fine. Or I will be, once this infernal buzzing stops." He grumbled.

Galaxy looked around. They'd landed in what was once a copse of trees, reducing it to splinters and kindling. A few miles away, there was a large castle, expanding at least three miles across the horizon. It towered high over the grassy terrain, the grey, menacing structure looming cruelly over anyone who dared go near it. Flapping in the breeze, flags were tied to the top of golden coloured poles atop the various battlements and towers. Heavily armoured men, Human in appearance, but with blue tinted skin, patrolled the boundaries. A handful of soldiers who were situated on the battlement nearest were watching. Galaxy could see they were talking, but couldn't understand what it was they were saying. She could pick up the edges of their conversation, but their words were as alien to her as they were to them. She made a quick scan of the orbit. Not a single satellite up there was functioning. Flashpoint gave her a look too.

"Odd." He said. "I can't get a link-up to download their language."

"Neither can I. Their satellite system's offline." Galaxy replied.

Something whistled through the air and clanged harmlessly into their armour. They looked over at the castle. The men on the battlement closest were firing at them, bow strings taugt, arrows ready. Then the hail of metal tipped wooden shafts started. The arrows came down hard, some falling short of the large aliens, others bouncing harmlessly off their armour.

"It all seems a bit odd to me. They have the techonology for satellites, yet they seem to insist on using medieval means of attack." Flashpoint mused.

"Then I suggest we do something before they bring out what they use for catapults." Galaxy said and turned away from the castle, plucking another arrow from her shoulder joint as if it were nothing more than a splinter.

"Agreed. We'll try and make contact with them once we've learned more about them." Flashpoint replied.

"I just hope that Raid and the others are okay...."

"They will be." Galaxy said, wrapping one large arm around the transformed fire engine and heaving him off his feet.

The arrows had started to slow and the pair of them could hear something large and heavy being trundled across cobbles. Galaxy launched, blue fire erupting from her rockets and she propelled herself and Flashpoint upwards, towards the tear that shimmered in the sky. She plowed right through it, and instead of ending up almost slamming into the nose of the Solstice, she merely ended up on the otherside. They both looked at it. The arrows were falling short of them now, their altitude too high for the hand crafted weapons to reach. The tear shimmered excitedly and spat a spherical object out.

"That's the LDP!" Flashpoint exclaimed, almost excitedly.

The spherical mass of alien technology whizzed off in the opposite direction, scanning and recording as much data as it could.

"We gotta catch it, and let them know that it's a one way deal." Galaxy rumbled and set off after the speedy little metal orb, Flashpoint tucked firmly under arm, mumbling something about not liking heights.

Epitaph

Krusher was no seated in the command chair, Jetstream stood next to him at her station. Silence filled the bridge as everybody continued with their work. After the whole fiasco with having to explain Turbulance's sudden appearance to everyone, he'd been persuaded by a slightly paranoid Hookshot to go back and check if the Autobots had survived the last attack and too see if Turbulance was temporarily siding with them out of spite. It was a feasible idea, something Turbulance had done before, but not to spite Krusher or his comrades. The weak, temporary alliance was a necessity, to stop Carjack from revealing them. The plan, in the end had failed. Carjack, along with the micro chip, had been destroyed by a rogue Decepticon, and Turbulance had been outcasted for failing such an important mission, one that if completed successfully, could've meant the downfall of all Autobots. But now, they'd reversed course, and were now heading back to the last area of space where they'd left the small Autobot group floundering with a set of latch mines attached to the hull of their ship. Krusher hoped to find debris, and lots of it.

"We're comming up on the designated coordinates, sir." Roadtrain announced.

"Good." Krusher rumbled. "Give me full view."

The view creen flickered on and they looked at the patch of space where the Solstice had last been seen.

"Where's all the debris then?" Roadtrain asked curiously.

Krusher clenched his fist and slammed it into the armrest.

"Scan the entire area. I want to know where they are!" He ordered angrily.

"Nothing." Steele announced after a moment.

Krusher cast a look to Jetstream. She tapped a few buttons then shrugged.

"No debris." She said. "They must've survived and regained control of their ship."

Krusher eyed her curiously.

"What?" She asked. "We didn't have enough latch mines left to spare to rip them apart, only enough to knock their systems offline and send the ship out of control."

"Where are they now?" He demanded.

There was another moment of silence as instruments were worked and data checked.

"Not too far from here." Hookshot replied.

"Set a course to intercept and ready the weapons. I want them in *pieces*." He snarled.

12 - Troll

Seranta 3 - Outpost

Turbulence landed on the old landing strip of the decaying space station and transformed as he slid to a stop. He looked around at the various inhabitants as they shuffled themselves around the small space port on tiny, odd looking vehicles. It had taken him a while, but he'd finally done it. He'd managed to retrieve the Teleport Modulator and make it back to the knackered old space bound outpost. The retrieval had been easy. He'd caught up with the crudely put together road train of traders and reduced them and their hauls and mounts to burned out carcasses and shells. The leader had refused to hand it over, and so Turbulence went for the much easier, and much more appealing option. The small device was now safely tucked away behind the black cockpit glass of his jet form, which rested at his chest. He walked from the landing strip and made his way out of the space port and into the main street, amongst the rabble of the various different races, all differentiating in sizes, colour and shapes. He side-stepped around a large, walking pile of flesh that was almost as big as he was and made his way toward the market place, where he hoped he would locate his contact, the Cybertronian who held the coordinates to the Epitaph's location. Stepping into the crowded central circle, he took note of all the market stalls and made an estimate of how many people were currently at each one, bartering, buying, talking and arguing. Another old habit of his, one that he didn't intend on breaking anytime soon. It always helped to know as much about your immediate surroundings as possible before entering. Opposite, was the old alleyway, where he'd met the skulking bot before, at the start of the week. It was late into the afternoon already. He should be there. Turbulence made his way across the market place, stepping over and around whomever got in his way. Ignoring all calls for his attention from the market stalls, he proceeded to scan the alleyway. Only one figure made an appearance on his optical read-outs. He grinned slightly and stepped into the alley, greeted instantly by a pair of electric blue optics lurking in the blackness of an old loading door.

"I've got the Teleport Modulator." Turbulence announced. "What're the Epitaph's coordinates?"
The small ex-Autobot stepped from the shadows.

"First, hand over the Teleport Modulator. Y'know, for insurance." He replied evenly.

Turbulence produced the small device. When the ex-Autobot made a grab for it, he put it out of reach, holding it just above his head, like an older brother taunting a younger sibling.

"No, no, no. I want the coordinates first. Then you'll get your TM. Understood?"

A wry smile and a slight narrowing of blue optics.

"Listen, I know you don't trust me, and I don't trust you. We have our reasons, though they may not be wholly personal, but I am one to trust."

A black, metallic hand swung up, fingers wrapping around the ex-Autobot's neck as he was heaved off the floor and slammed against the grimey stone wall with a yelp of surprise. He gripped at Turbulence's wrists and fingers, trying to release the vice like grip as it continued to slowly crush his throat.

"Your insurance for this little exchange can be your Spark for my coordinates. Sound like a fair deal?"

The irritated Decepticon growled, red optics going to glowing slits.

There was a strangled garble of words that sounded more like cracked audio static than actual words.

The attempt at speech was swiftly replaced with a quick, pained nod. Turbulence released his grip slightly, to let the slightly smaller Cybertronian speak.

"Ok..." He said, his voice crackling horribly as he stopped flailing his legs. "Last I saw, the Epitaph had reversed course, going back to a sector of space better known around these parts as Area Delta-Y. If you're quick enough, and if the transportation office is still open and functioning properly, you can get there within a day."

Turbulence faltered. He knew of that part of space. There was nothing there. It was classed as dead space. He released the ex-Autobot and let him fall roughly to the floor. He sat and rubbed his throat, looking up at Turbulence, who'd started walking off with the Teleportation Modulator safely tucked away once again.

"Hey!" He shouted roughly with a slight electronic shriek underscoring his accent. "What about the deal?!"

"Your best bet is to stay put, or find yourself on the black market in several hundred little pieces."

Turbulence replied calmly before stepping out into the market place.

Muborthia - Thieve's Hill

Malak and his son Adraahn stood at the attic window, looking glass in place, taking turns to watch the four Sorcerers who stood atop the near-by Thieve's Hill, circling the tear, hands raised and chanting. A sphere of swirling colour enveloped the fizzing tear and with a rush of dispersed magic and colour, the tear was banished.

"They did it." Malak said softly, a small smile playing the corners of his lips.

"But what of the Demons that came through?" Adraahn asked.

The smile fell from his father's lips.

"I don't know. It's something we will have to deal with if they ever return..."

"You mean, we're just going to let these monsters roam our land and do as they please?"

Malak faltered. He really didn't know how to answer that, instead averting his attention back through the long, cylindrical looking glass and at the Sorcerers up on Thieve's Hill who were preparing to depart, to search for anymore tears.

"Father?" Adraahn provoked.

Malak sighed and put the looking glass away, in its deep purple velvet lined case.

"I'm sure Damarus the Grey has alerted the king already of the creature's presence." He said.

"What if they attack and they over power the king and his men...?"

"Son, your outlook on life can be bleak." Malak said bluntly. "Stop it."

"Sorry, father. It just worries me that mother and Jennah are out there somewhere, on their way back from Grandma's."

"It fills me with worry too, but your mother is a survivor. She can fight with the best of them." Malak said soothingly, resting a slim fingered black hand on his son's shoulder.

Muborthia - Nordar Plains

The rain had gone from a fine, damp mist, now coming down to the earth in large, blobs of water, splashing hard against everything it came into contact with. Flare shuffled a little further back into the opening of the cave, going as far back as she could. The cave may have had a wide mouth, but it very quickly narrowed and her feet still stuck out in the wet, the rain clanging wetly against her sunny armour. She'd managed to repair the minor damage to her internal communications system and was trying to get a lock onto Cybertron. But not knowing where she was, or where Cybertron was, left her unable to make

contact, and very much alone. The only thing she found comfort in, was that she hadn't been abandoned this time, and that Burnout was searching for her. She was sure of it, having grown quite an attachment to the old Decepticon in the few days she'd known him. Afterall, it was him who had a hand in her survival. She felt she owed him her Spark, as much as she owed Crash and Propshaft. Heaving a sigh, she rested her chin on her knees and thought. Should she stay put, incase anyone would come through the odd tear, looking for her? Or should she take the initiative, and search for a way home herself, or even a way to make contact with Cybertron? Another moment's thought and she looked out into the heavy rain. She wanted to get away from this strange, organic planet and go home, where she knew the terrain and the inhabitants. She edged back out of the cave mouth and brought herself up to her full height, the rain hammering down on her armour, the incessant pouring of water falling in little waterfalls from her shoulder armour and wings. She looked up into the dark, forboding clouds. The best place to start would be the area she emerged from. She leapt neatly into the air, wings and armour rotating, sliding back into place to form a, small, alien air craft, and she flew off, into the cover of the low clouds.

Muborthia - Tenarrhe Forest

Galaxy snorted as she sat crosslegged in the middle of the forest, watching as Flashpoint paced back and forth, hands at his back, optics downcast.

"Watching you is sending my balancing systems off kilter. Stop it." She grunted and propped herself up with a massive hand, crushing a fallen, thick tree in the process.

Flashpoint looked up at the sudden snapping and creaking of wood, and smiled dryly. Galaxy was never one for being inconspicuous. Not only was her bulk hard to disguise outside of anything industrial, she was more adept at the straight forward approach to living, thoroughly able and skilled enough to fend off any unwanted attention from any would-be attackers.

"Why don't we just up and leave this place?" She grumbled sourly.

"Because we have no idea how far away we are until we find the LDP, so until then, we stay put."

Flashpoint replied evenly.

He knew how Galaxy felt. He didn't want to be stuck on this planet any longer than needed, no matter how curious he got about the natives.

"You got any idea as to where the LDP is then?"

"As far as I know, it was headed north, somewhere." Flashpoint sighed.

"Then we better get after it. It'll be dark soon, which will give us some cover." Galaxy prompted eagerly.

Flashpoint nodded. "Sounds good. But until then, we rest here. I don't know about you, but my energy levels are pretty low."

"Same." Galaxy said and reclined against a large heap of felled rock, arms tucked behind her head.

Flashpoint walked over to her and reclined beside her. After a moment at staring at the darkening sky, Flashpoint sat upright, gingerly placing a metal plated hand against the cool, light grey rock. Galaxy cast him a sidelong look, then sat upright herself, doing the same. Both exchanged looks of mild confusion.

"Does this rock feel like it's moving to you...?" Flashpoint asked slowly and carefully.

Galaxy hesitated a moment then removed her large hand.

"Yeah..." She said slowly and got to her feet.

Flashpoint pulled himself up too, standing beside Galaxy. The rock seemed to form a head; a large crack appearing where there previously was no crack, and a pair of emerald spheres snapped open. Arms and legs unfurled and the rock pushed itself upright, standing hunched and bow-legged, breath sounding like someone walking up a gravel pathway.

"What is it...?" Galaxy asked slowly as she returned its stare.

Flashpoint took a step away from the creature, seemingly trying to use Galaxy as a shield.

"Uh... A Troll, of some description...?" He hazarded. "Some Humans believed that Trolls were made of stone-"

"So you're pulling your theory from Human folklore, now?"

"They said that we - aliens that is - didn't exist." Flashpoint pointed out simply.

The Troll took a lumbering step forward. Galaxy didn't shift, but Flashpoint didn't much like the idea of going up against something that was bigger than him and something that could quite easily grind him into metal shavings. It burred something then snarled, showing a set of ragged, stoney teeth. Galaxy took up a defensive stance. The Troll gave one last study of the newcomers before launching itself at them. Flashpoint ducked out of the way as it slammed hard into Galaxy, who staggered backwards a few paces, grappling with the solid creature. It tugged on her wrist, and sent her off balance, shaking the surrounding trees with the sudden impact. The Troll clambered onto her and was about to land a punishing blow to her head, but she squirmed an arm free and slung it off. Rolling to her feet, snapping and flattening trees in the process, she lashed out, hitting the Troll square in the chest, following through with unleashing a barrage of heated plasma shots into its chest. There was a scream much akin to the sound of stone being ground together, and the Troll scratched at the melted patch on its chest, emerald stone eyes wide and shining in dismay. Galaxy took a step back, charging a final shot. Flashpoint took cover behind another boulder, hoping that that one wouldn't come to life, and braced himself for the explosion. The screaming stopped abruptly, and there was a shower of grey stone, some of it bouncing off Flashpoint and Galaxy's armour with a solid set of *clangs*. Flashpoint emerged from his spot and looked at the smouldering pile of what was left of the Troll. Galaxy stood beside a still up-right tree, fingering the new dents and scratches in her deep green armour.

"Think all inhabitants on this planet wanna kill us?" She asked idly, flicking a piece of stone from a gap between her armour plating.

"It's a possibility. But then, aren't most races frightened of things they don't recognise or understand?"

Flashpoint said, crouching down to investigate the rubble further.

He picked up a fragment of stone and rubbed his thumb across the jagged surface. A lump of clear, thick liquid oozing from the stone fragment and plopping to the forest floor with a soft hissing as it made contact with the damp grass. Flashpoint hummed and stood upright again, looking at the surroundings, taking in the churned forest floor and the battered trees.

"Let's get looking for that probe, shall we?" He sighed.

Solstice

"What happened?" Raid demanded, sitting forward in his chair of command, the thin, snaking wires that connected him to the Optic Visualizer trailing after him.

"No idea." Deadmetal replied, equally puzzled.

"The tear just vanished." Blue Falcon added. "Like it's been sealed, or something."

"Definitely got something along the lines of a major power surge before it disappeared." Speeder said, inspecting his data read outs more closely.

"What kind of power surge?"

"No idea. As far as I can tell, it wasn't anything tech related or electric based."

Raid clenched his massive fists, growing more and more frustrated.

"What about the LDP?"

"Lost all contact with it." Gundog said from his cubby hole.

"We were cut off from it as soon as the tear disappeared. I'm working on seeing if I can get a tabs on it again..." Deadmetal said, his metallic fingers skittering across the keyboard of his work station.

"Do we still have the co-ordinates for the world they were transported to?"

"Yessir." Blue Falcon announced.

"We've got something comming up on our aft fast." Gundog said abruptly. "It's the Epitaph."

"Slag..." Raid grumbled quietly. "Just what we need."

"Weapons online and ready." The transformed Bell UH-1C announced clearly.

"Shields at full capacity." Deadmetal put in.

"Falcon, follow those co-ordinates. Speeder, go and finish the repairs on the Transwarp drivers. Dee, Gundog, prepare for battle." Raid ordered calmly and leaned back in his chair.

He brought up the Solstice's rear monitors and, as said, there was the Decepticon warship, Epitaph, dark purple and black, the Decepticon insignia painted bold and purple on its hull. Raid heaved a silent sigh. They'd come back to finish the job...

13 - A Precarious Position

Epitaph

Steele clung to the hull of the Epitaph as the battered warship continued to close the distance between itself and the small Autobot warship Solstice. Krusher had sent him and Hookshot out to repair some ageing outer panels, replacing them with a couple of un-painted sheets of metal that were found lurking in the far reaches of the cargo bay. Unfortunately, just as the new panels had been fixed into place, Krusher had decided that then was the best time to activate the ship's Transwarp Drivers. The warning given out was short and to the point, and only left the two Constructicons with ten seconds to get back inside. Hookshot had made it just in time, being the closest to the hatch. Steele ended up clinging onto the hull of the ship for dear life as it entered the slip-stream. Now he felt ill right to his core. His systems were buzzing horribly and there was a slight fuzzy feeling around his central processor, making it hard to think straight. Getting his body to obey commands in sync was proving difficult too. Steele grumbled something as the primary plasma cannon a few yards ahead of him erupted from the deep purple and black hull of the battle scarred ship. He cast a look over at the equally damaged Solstice and groaned outloud. The Autobots had their weapons ready too, their shielding flickering gently as it was brought to full capacity. Or was it the Epitaph's shields he was seeing...? It was hard to tell. He was having a tough time focusing on anything. A little way off to his left, was the hatch Hookshot had escaped into. Now, if only he could shuffle his way across the side of the ship and open the hatch, he was safe. He lifted a hand experimentally. It drifted higher, as if numb and non-functioning. He snatched his arm back, regaining his grip on the hull. If he had so little control over his own arm, then he was stuffed until his systems sorted themselves out.

Up ahead, the Solstice opened fire, the laser shots flaring cruelly against the Epitaph's shields. Steele tucked his head down, resting his forehead against the metal of the hull as he clung on. The ship shuddered as the Decepticon crew retaliated; super heated plasma shots and lasers being fired at the Solstice, battering the ship's defences. The two warships continued to fire upon one another, the blackness of space turning into a secluded array of whites, yellows and oranges as the various shots were exchanged. Shields rippled, the hull vibrated unhappily and Steele swore bitterly. The Solstice was still moving away and the Epitaph was in hot pursuit. Steele hazarded a look up, his optics focusing rather fuzzily on the exchange. Beyond the lasers and the plasma shots, the Solstice seemed to elongate before vanishing. The attack ended just as abruptly as it had started. The Solstice had engaged its Transwarp Drivers and gone into the slip-stream. Steele groaned. He knew what was coming and he couldn't do a damn thing about it. The hull beneath was vibrating, thrumming with building energy. Again. Krusher, in all his growing fury for the persistent Autobots, had ordered the Epitaph into a slip-stream too. Steele tried to move closer to the hatch, but his limbs still felt oddly numb and his systems still felt strangely fuzzy around the edges. He tried to transmit a message to those inside. The last Transwarp had knocked his personal communications off kilter. All Steele could do now was hope he didn't lose his grip in the slip-stream. If that happened, then... He shuddered at the lingering thought and awkwardly flattened himself against the dark hull. The Epitaph gave a lurch, and fled into the slipstream, space seemingly stretching into a tunnel of streaking whites, deep blues and black around it. Steele closed his optics, not wanting to witness the slip-stream close in around him anymore. He'd seen it one too many times before, although, admittedly, it was within the safe confines of

the ship he was aboard, instead of clinging to the side of it, desperation and fear ringing throughout his system.

Muborthia - Orbit

The Epitaph finally slowed, emerging from the slip-stream in orbit of a planet. Steele was rigid and unmoving against the hull, optics wide. The Solstice was just up ahead, making its way toward one of the planet's three moons. The Epitaph kept its distance, shields raised, but guns and cannons tucked away and cold. Apparently someone on board had persuaded Krusher to take a different course of action, rather than just plowing in, all guns blazing. Who knew what modifications could've been made to the Solstice during the slip-stream transit. Raid may be blind, but he wasn't stupid, and neither was his crew. Steele's guess landed on Jetstream. She seemed to prefer sneak attacks to blatantly obvious attacks. Some small part of him thanked her for that. At least he wouldn't be subjected to any live fire again. For the moment, anyway...

He stayed still a moment. He still felt like he was gonna heave a gasket and several fuses, but he could feel his systems slowly sorting themselves out. Testing his functioning capability again, he raised his hand and brought it down again, gripping onto a fresh piece of hull. He sighed and started the slow, tedious process of shuffling toward the hatch that would allow him to enter the ship. He brought his foot up and the ship lurched again. Steele promptly lost his grip on the hull of the Epitaph and space claimed him as its own. Steele yelped and flailed as best he could, a hand shooting forward to try and reclaim his grip on the scarred metal, but he was tumbling away from the Decepticon warship, unable to do a thing about it. He moaned. The planet was growing larger and larger, soon to be the dominator of his vision. He curled up as the planet's gravity gripped him and pulled him down, toward the surface. He hoped that if anyone saw him, he'd just look like a meteorite or something. He also hoped, prayed that Hookshot and the others would come and look for him when they realised that he wasn't onboard or clinging to the hull of the ship anymore.

Muborthia - Nordar Plains

Fighting through the thickening mud of the valley, a black skinned mother and her daughter made their way toward the plains, heavy cloaks wrapped tightly around them, providing some comfort from the driving rain and wind.

"When are we going to stop?" The girl whined. "My legs are hurting!"

"We will stop soon, Jennah." Her mother replied, breathlessly. "We just need to get out onto the plains before the mud slides start, otherwise we're doomed."

She gripped the hand of her little girl a little more tightly; a reassuring squeeze in such a worrying moment in time. Jennah's mother pulled her hood further over her face. The rain was stinging her bare skin and it was hard enough to see as it was. After a moment of pushing forward, sloshing through the thick, sticky mud, Jennah tugged at her mother's sleeve.

"Mummy...." She said in a near whimper. "I can hear water."

"Of course you can." She replied flatly. "It's raining and there's ponds and small lakes dotted about all over these va... lleys..." She looked over her shoulder and into the grey of the rain.

Her daughter was right. The noise was something more than the rain-fall. It sounded like the rapids of Ishlamor, those angry, turbulent waters having claimed more than their fair share of innocent lives over the years.

She eyed a series of outcrops, working their way up the side of the narrow valley like terraces.

"Jannah, start climbing up the side. *Now.*" She ordered.

Jannah looked positively terrified now, the growling noise of rushing water now an angry roar. Her mother hooked her hands under Jannah's arms and heaved her upward. Jannah clambered awkwardly onto the ledge of smooth stone that was clustered by clinging bushes, moss, weeds and flowers.

"Keep climbing!" Her mother shouted over the rapidly growing din. "I'll be right behind you!"

Jannah did as told. She had no reason in her young mind to doubt her mother, and so she continued the slippery climb up the side of the valley. Casting a quick glance over her shoulder, Jannah did indeed see that her mother was following, as promised. But the water from the rain bloated river up-valley was already rushing around the bend, sucking and slapping and tumbling down the valley with a roar. Jannah screamed as her mother lost her footing, the murky, turbulent rush of water claiming her for its own and washing her down the valley. Her mother's scream for help was abruptly cut off as her head vanished into the raging water.

Jannah sat huddled against the rocks, her whimpers now sobs. She was all alone in a flooded valley and horribly lost. They'd had to take the detour from their regular route, as it was the only one clear of storm debris. Trees and boulders larger than herself were swept by, tumbling and bouncing in the turbid waters. She pulled her soaking cloak closer around her as she sat, hugging her knees, shivering and crying. Then she looked up, her attention momentarily and blissfully distracted by a streak of fire cutting through the clouds with a violent hiss, streaming steam and smoke as the rain around it evaporated. The large object slammed into the lip of the valley wall, cutting through the rock above and just to her right with a loud, rain dulled *thud*. Jannah ducked down, her mind reeling, unable of what to make of the new scenario she'd found herself abruptly dumped in. Maybe it was one of the gods, come to claim her mother's spirit. Maybe it'd come to claim *her*. Wiping away the falling tears from her cheeks with an already wet hand, she decided to follow her mother's order to get out of the valley and get to safety. She scabbled up onto the next ledge, then the next and the next. Finally, huffing and doubled over on the wet ground, she was out of the valley and sat on the plains that they were carved into. The distinct smell of burnt wood and grass mingled with the smell of damp. There, to her right, some way off, was the deep trailing gouge in the earth the falling object had made. The rain hissed as it hit the upturned dirt and stone. Jannah's curiosity propelled her forward, slowly, the tears streaming down her face once more. She made it half way, then her knees gave way, collapsing to the ground in sobs that racked her tiny frame. Beyond, in the crater at the end of the smoking trail, something moved with a painful, metallic creak. A large, alien alloyed deep purple hand landed on the lip of the crater, sinking into the mud that was quickly reforming, no thanks to the persistent rain. Jannah was curled over, giving off the illusion that she was just a pile of noisy, rich blue cloth that had been dumped. She had no idea what was emerging unsteadily from the crater, her grief for her lost mother too much for her to handle.

Rain bounced wetly off the metallic form that was stirring just a few yards away from her. Two, large red optics peered, unfocused over the lip of the crater. There was a low, rumbling moan that was underscored rather neatly by an electronic sound. Steele rubbed his head. He'd landed head first and he wasn't pleased about it. His processor hurt more than anything right now, and the odd noise coming from the pile of blue material a little way off wasn't helping matters. The Constructicon manipulated his vision, switching to heat based sight. The pile of cloth was warm, but just barely. It was also small. *Very* small. He dimly recalled seeing something of similar build and stature back on Earth whilst raiding an abandoned construction site with Hookshot. There was a pack of them, and they were, what was the term...? *Children*. He thought, his voice a mere mumble sounding out through the horrible buzzing and pounding in his processor. He scanned the surrounding area. It was only himself and the child there, and

nothing else for miles. And having no idea where he was only made him feel worse. He turned around in his crater and made for the opposite direction. He climbed out and stood up, feeling rather unsteady on his feet. He swayed on the spot for a moment as the rain dribbled uncontrollably from his armour. He took a few steps forward, intending to break into a run when he got his balance back completely. But he stopped. He looked over his shoulder, a look resembling mild worry forming on his metallic features. He fought through the ache in his processor and searched for any semblance of satellite activity, or something that might allow him to communicate with the locals. No such luck. All satellites were non-functioning and dead. He sighed and rubbed a hand across his face, flicking some water into the air. The organic was still curled up on the floor making those horrible sounds. Even though he didn't want to, he didn't want to leave the creature here, alone in the cold and rain. He may survive the temperature and wet, but the young organic might not. And it wouldn't be fair to abandon such a small, vulnerable creature, would it? He sighed again and turned around, taking unsteady steps toward the hunkered lump of material.

He crouched down before Jennah and with more delicacy than one would expect from such a large piece of sentient machinery, Steele gripped a corner of the blue cloak between forefinger and thumb, pulling it up, revealing the shuddering and sobbing girl. Jennah looked up abruptly as a cold blast of wind carrying icy pellets of water invaded her mourning privacy. Her silvery eyes met with Steele's large, red optics. She screamed, the high pitched noise burning with a great intensity through Steele's pounding head. Jennah fumbled, tangling herself up in the cloak as Steele released it, the pair of them falling backwards into the muddy grass, Jennah screaming and Steele with both hands to the sides of his head.

"Please, for the love of Primus, *stop that noise!*" Steele grumbled sourly.

His words sounding like a smoothly garbled string of noise, both deep and resonating like a cave, and shrill at the same time, were completely lost on the little girl.

"Don't kill me! I don't want to die!" Jennah sobbed, her words becoming lost on the large, mechanical creature that sat on its aft before her, just as his words were lost on her.

It felt like a small part of himself stopped functioning and died inside. It was going to be a long day and the inability to communicate with the child made him feel all the more frustrated with himself.

Should've walked off... Left the organic here... He thought miserably.

Then he looked at the girl again. She was soaked, shivering uncontrollably and as miserable as sin. Needless to say, if he had any, it was a sight that tugged at his heart strings. He sighed. Hookshot was right. So were the others. His soft spot for the tiny, helpless organics would lead him into an endless amount of trouble. But right now, it was either have a bit of company who knew the terrain or be on his own in a foreign land. Though neither could understand one another, Steele opted to go with his core instinct. He couldn't help it. He came from a large family unit and was among the eldest, playing older brother to a lot of the other bots. Of course, that was before the war broke out and he and one of his brothers got drafted into the Decepticon ranks.

Steele righted himself with a grim determination. His systems had stopped buzzing with the after affect of being exposed to the slip-stream so he could stand without the impending feeling of toppling over. Jennah sneezed as she tried to get to her entangled feet free of the clingy, wet material that made her cloak up. Steele took a step forward, going into a crouch, his hand shooting out and scooping the girl up, who in turn started to scream again. Steele ignored the pounding in his processor and transformed, panels sliding around his form as his limbs and head tucked in, making way for a digger arm and bucket and glass cab. Jennah felt herself propelled in an odd way, then a padded, yet mildly hard seat sprang into existence beneath her. The rain and wind was no longer getting to her, instead streaming down the

flat windows of the strange contraption, the wind howling and whistling around the cab, as if angry it couldn't get to her. Then heat started to fill the cab from below. She shuddered, and looked around, wide eyed. She had no idea what just happened, or what was going to happen next, but she was starting to feel warm again. Up front, the thick, yellow arm with the toothed bucket on its end reared up. There was an odd, frightening roar and the segmented lengths of metal that supported the machine started moving, churning dirt and grass, leaving deep tracks behind in its wake. Her heart pounded as it moved forward with her inside. The same, strange sound that had come from the machine earlier, when it stood on two legs and had red eyes, sounded out again. This time, the sound was softer, somehow sounding more reassuring and slightly apologetic. She stared at the levers and buttons with wide eyes and gripped onto the sides of the seat as the digger trundled forward with a deep rattling and growling of cloned engine. So far, the creature made no attempt to kill her. If anything, she was feeling more comfortable, warmer and a lot less lonely. She didn't relinquish her grip though, and tears still rolled down her dark cheeks.

Epitaph

Hookshot fidgeted in his seat, his hands flying deftly across the controls at his disposal. He had to find Steele. He'd been practically begging Krusher not to go into another slip-stream with Steele still outside. But the disgruntled chinook ignored the Constructicon and went ahead with the pursuit and attack. It was only Jetstream's logic that had stopped Krusher from ordering another attack.

"He's gone planet-side." Jetstream said levelly from her post beside Krusher.

"I didn't order him to go planet-side." Krusher growled.

"Dear Primus, are you really feeling that dim today?" Roadtrain commented unenthusiastically.

"What was that?" Krusher growled irritably, leaning forward in his chair of command, red optics narrowing on the transporter.

"Never mind...." Roadtrain replied and got back to helping Hookshot locate Steele.

"Was going after the Autobots really more important than securing the safety of your crew?" Jetstream asked.

"Six dead Autobots is more important than one dead Constructicon." Krusher replied flatly.

"*What?*" Hookshot spun around in his chair, optics narrowing dangerously on his commander.

"And you wonder why we're a small crew?" Roadtrain said from his seat, looking more at Jetstream than Krusher. "Because this idiot's our commander, that's why." He snorted. "Can't keep his temper to himself."

"One more word out of you, Roadtrain, and I will personally dismantle you in a very slow and painful fashion." Krusher growled.

"See?" Roadtrain gestured, faling his arms slightly at Krusher.

"I'm going after him." Hookshot said abruptly, standing.

"No you are not." Krusher said, also standing, trying to make himself look as imposing as possible.

Hookshot ignored him and strode forward. Krusher's hand shot out and grabbed him by the crane arm that was attached to his back and swung him around, sending him staggering for balance.

"Now you've done it..." Roadtrain muttered, leaning back in his chair, waiting for Hookshot's retaliation.

"You either let me go willingly, or I'm going to force my way out." Hookshot warned.

"Steele, like yourself and Roadtrain, has no built in propulsion system. So what makes you think that he survived entry into the planet's atmosphere? What makes you believe that he survived the landing?"

Krusher asked, looming over the furious Constructicon.

Something inside Hookshot snapped. He'd taken Krusher's abuse and smarmy comments over the

years without a second thought to them. But this time, he was in no mood to be pushed around. He clenched his fist and launched himself at Krusher. The action was so fast, Krusher had no idea what was happening, promptly ending up on the floor, a fist shaped dent in his jaw, his vision slightly blurry. Roadtrain started laughing uncontrollably and Jetstream tutted, stepping in front of Hookshot as he walked determinedly for the bridge exit.

"Hang on Hookshot." She said calmly. "I have a better idea, rather than charging in blindly."

Hookshot blinked, mildly confused, the anger that was burning through his systems subsiding a little.

There was something in Jetstream's tone that made him listen. Something comforting and trustworthy.

"What?" He grunted.

"I've detected some old, offline satellites in orbit of the planet. If we can get one back online, then maybe we can learn a bit more about this world before we go in for a closer look. Sound good?" She said.

Hookshot mulled the idea over. He knew Steele survived the fall. He may be a 'lowly' Constructicon, but he knew how to enter a planet's atmosphere without the aid of a ship. It was basic training at the Decepticon academy they attended.

"Alright." He said. "I can wait a little while longer..."

"Good." She smiled and walked back over to where Krusher sat.

Roadtrain's laughing had finally subsided, and he gave Hookshot a questioning look as he approached his station again. Behind, in the center of the bridge, Jetstream helped Krusher to his feet, who in return, glared at her. Hookshot ignored him and turned to his console. He had a dead satellite to catch.

14 - Satallite Catch

Solstice

Gundog and Deadmetal clung to the side of the forgotten satallite as it rotated lazily, caught in the smallest moon's personal orbit. Blue optics surveyed the damage caused by space debris of past years, metallic fingers carefully prying at the panels that kept the innards secluded from the cold grip of space. "From what we got off the LDP, I'm surprised we found something like this." Gundog commented idly, peeling an oval panel off and holding it up for inspection, tilting it around as he looked at its white and red pattern.

Deadmetal made the electronic equivalent of a grunt of agreement.

"It didn't send us much data on the planet's technology. As far as the LDP seems to be concerned, this world's still going through a more archaic stage of life, compared to that of more technologically advanced planets like Kemdor, Saltakh and Earth..." He replied as he peered into the innards of the satellite from his side of the machine, gently prodding a long, loose blue wire with a slim metallic index finger.

"Think someone from another world was watching them?"

"Not sure. From what we've gathered already, the inhabitants of this world seem advanced enough to create the likes of observatories, albeit of a limited ability, so surely they would have noticed these by now."

"If they have noticed them, don't you think they'd have tried doing something by now?" Gundog asked, peering around the side of the satellite at Deadmetal, who was performing the delicate task of fixing unknown wiring together.

There was a moment's pause.

"Who knows." He gave a shrug befitting of one wearing an Apache AH-64A. "Maybe they are working on a way of reaching the satallites. Maybe they're not: Possibly too wrapped up in their own little musings."

"Surely Galaxy and Flashpoint would've noticed these things by now." Gundog said, swatting the side of the chunk of debris. "She's not thick."

Deadmetal stopped his work briefly, his metallic features allowing for some semblance of a bemused expression.

"Y'know, I think that's the closest to being nice to her you've ever been since hitching a ride with us." He commented and continued his work.

Gundog grumbled something. Deadmetal clicked something into place and the satellite's emergency functions groaned softly into life, the long, badly damaged solar wings slowly and laborously extending outward to catch the sun's UV.

"Now what?"

"Now we haul it closer to the ship for a better inspection and download some info." Deadmetal grinned. Both helicopter-bound Autobots got a grip on the satallite and engaged their propulsion systems, making a controlled, yet awkwardly slow bee-line for the Solstice which was silently idling in the moon's shadow.

"We're ready for the third stage." Deadmetal transmitted.

"Now deploying the cable." Replied Speeder.

A small circle traced around a patch on the lower of the ship's scuffed and mildly dented nose. The newly formed panel slid upward and a long, fibre optic type cable wormed out of it into free space.

Gundog reached out and snagged the end of it, guiding it toward the satellite and plugging it in, the tip of the cable splitting into hundreds of separate strands of silicone type material, invading the databank of the long lost piece of alien technology. On board the Solstice, Speeder and Raid kept vigil on the data that was being uploaded to the ship's own databanks with interest.

"Hmmm..."

Speeder looked over at Raid at the soft rumbling sound that emanated from the team's leader.

"So I'm not the only one seeing this?" He asked, slightly befuddled by the data that was slowly being shunted into their own computer.

"Not at all, and I must say, it is rather interesting." Raid said, unseeing blue optics focused on the small monitor that protruded neatly from the arm of his chair.

"Come across anything like this before, boss?" Speeder inquired.

"I've heard of it, but never ever come across it." He said, now utterly fascinated by the mounting data.

Cybertron

The bulky figure of Contrail stalked around in circles; large, metallic hands tucked at his back, blue optics cast at the broken and bent alien alloyed ground. Sat on an equally battered and bent pipe, the much older Wherry watched his younger comrade pace in frustrated circles. Only four had survived the attack, one of which was Primus knows where on some foreign planet.

"You couldn't have done anything." Wherry wheezed, a slight note of irritation edging his increasingly fractured tones.

Contrail muttered something.

"The attack was too swift. No one could've seen it coming. Not even yourself." The old village leader continued.

"Solar was not completely ready for battle." Contrail growled.

Wherry looked on. It'd been several cycles since the attack had happened. He knew that this was about more than just the suddenness of the attack and the lives it had cost. He proceeded to vent his thoughts outloud.

"It's something a little more than the initial attack that is bothering you." Wherry said pointedly, heaving himself from his sitting position, joints creaking in protest.

Contrail slowed his pace and eventually stopped his pacing, looking up, sparing his elder a brief glance before casting his blue optics skyward.

"It was Flare who attacked him. I saw her come in from above him." He said somberly. "But I couldn't do anything about it..."

There was a moment's quiet. Then Contrail spoke up again, redirecting his gaze and looking out across the battered and broken expanse of what was once something he considered to be utterly beautiful.

"There is only one way she could've survived that fire in the Energon chamber." He said.

"Decepticons." Wherry muttered as he tottered uneasily over to the powerful figure and taking up a position beside him.

"What lies they must have spun to get her to join their ranks and then attack her own..."

"They are Decepticons. They are the masters of all things deceit." Wherry replied somberly.

"I could have gone into the portal after the pair of them." Contrail said. "But Burnout-"

"You were in no condition to fight him. He is much bigger and stronger than you. Even if you weren't low on energy, you'd have still struggled against his mass." Wherry said, cutting off Contrail's thoughts.

Contrail Hmphed and folded his arms.

"It is only something you speculate. There is no solid evidence saying that I wouldn't be able to take him down and extinguish his spark." Contrail countered sourly.

Wherry nodded sagely.

"True. But I fear it is leaning heavily on the truth. I don't want to lose you. I've already lost so many that meant so much to me." The old Factionless bot said.

Contrail looked at him. This discussion was going nowhere useful, and it wasn't going to retrieve Solar and Flare anytime soon.

"I need to go back to the site of that strange portal." He decided rather abruptly.

Wherry's head snapped up, fading optics wide.

"And if the Decepticons are still there? At the site?" He prompted.

"Then I will fight them." Contrail said coldly.

Wherry's anger grew.

"Compared to me, you are still young." He said bitterly. "So I'll put your belligerent stubbornness down to your young age."

"Very well." Contrail replied evenly. "But I do believe that it is time we fought back for once, instead of running continuously."

Muborthia - Thieve's Hill

A small and sleek alien jet sliced through the darkness like a sliver of yellow sun, leaving a single contrail of white in its wake. Circling wide, quickly getting tighter in movements, the wings and panels of the craft shifted and folded in on themselves as four limbs and a head came into existence. Flare landed lightly, going into a crouch to try and subdue any rebelling vibrations that were caused by her landing. Blue optics scanned the area. She swore silently and climbed through the thick bushes and squat trees that clung to the side of the neatly mounded earth and made her way to the top. She couldn't detect any form of energy radiating from the peak of the old hill, unlike when she and her poor excuse for a brother had first emerged. That odd tingling sensation; the feel of raw energy flowing free, had vanished, evaporated into thin air. Cresting the hill, her fears were realised; The tear had gone. This time her curse was more fervent as anger and loneliness surged through her systems. If she was capable of such a thing, or even knew what it was, she would surely be crying through sheer frustration. She couldn't fly back to Cybertron purely because of the fact that she had no idea where she was and how far away this world was from hers. Or even if it was in the same dimension...

Resting on her knees now, she slammed two armoured fists into the soft ground below, leaving two large indentations in the soil. Not that far from the hill, someone was watching through a device that allowed the observer to see much farther than was natural to them.

Adraahn watched the Demon atop the hill with childlike curiosity. Though he was a teenager well on the road to becoming an adult, he still retained all his curiosity about everything around him. Though the idea of Demons from other dimensions scared him as much it did his father and Damarus the Grey, the fear did not stop him from watching things unfold from afar. He sat in his attic, oil lamp cold with the cylindrical looking glass pressed against his right eye. He watched Flare as she moved about atop Thieve's Hill, in a frustrated manner. *Looking for a way back to its own dimension, no doubt.* He thought darkly. *Possibly to get reinforcements or something...*

Something downstairs clanged loud enough to make him jump in surprise. He looked at a square framed device that was perched on an old wooden box. It had three hands, numbers around its edges in a perfect circle and it was ticking off every second of every minute of every hour. Adraahn could just about

make out the clock face and its numbers in the darkness of the creaky old attic. It was late. He should've been in bed two hours ago, sleeping. He heard his father moving about downstairs, the old fire blackened brass cooking pot that hung over the fire clattering against other metals. The sweet smell of breakfast meandered its way upward, filling the house with its tantalising scent. His father was preparing the morning meal, as he did everytime, at night. The process allowed for a fast re-heat in the morning to allow more time for the day's chores to be completed. Adraahn's stomach roiled in anticipation at the thought of the sweet tasting oats and milk that was being prepared for sunrise. Casting the thoughts containing food aside, he peered back through the looking glass and at Flare once more. A breath caught in his throat as he watched her transform again, reverting back into the secondary form she'd come back to the hill in. With an almost audible whistle of a powerful alien engine, she tore off back into the darkness, heading back the way she had come.

Epitaph

The two metallic forms of Hookshot and Jetstream were hunched over the delicate metal carcass of an old satellite they'd caught and brought aboard. It was now sat, perched upon a hastily constructed platform to suit its awkward and bulky form. The Constructicon stood on one side of the satellite while his superior stood on the other, investigating a green plastic board that had wires neatly attached to it. "Why would the inhabitants of this world leave such an important piece of technology to disintegrate in space...?" Jetstream mused quietly.

"Maybe they had no use for it anymore." Hookshot replied, equally as thoughtful as he probed the insides carefully with a sharp finger.

"If that's the case, then surely they'd have taken it back planetside, removed all its information and used it for spare parts to build another, better satellite."

Hookshot faltered. Jetstream was right. What's the point of abandoning a perfectly useful piece of equipment? It made no sense leaving it in orbit, forgotten and broken.

"Maybe they're like the creatures of Earth." He mumbled, as he carefully soldered a small wire back into what he hoped was its place of origin.

Jetstream looked up momentarily, slightly confused. Hookshot caught the look and proceeded to answer the unasked query.

"Some organics are not known for their ability to recycle used equipment and goods properly." He said simply as he concentrated on the work at hand, itching to get Steele back onboard the Epitaph.

After a moment longer of working in silence, the satellite gave a polite, albeit crackly, beep and several of its antennae lit up. The little tell tale lights onboard the space faring machine went mostly to red.

"Why can't it get a signal?" Hookshot asked absently.

"Maybe its manufacturer has been terminated." Jetstream offered. "There's no way to tell."

The tip of her finger split neatly open and a thin, black tendril was guided into the satellite, connecting neatly with the onboard computer. Within moments, she had extracted all the data stored within the satellite's onboard computers.

"Well?" Hookshot asked, impatience underscoring his tone.

Jetstream looked up at him, mildly bemused.

"It appears, that the whole world was terminated some time ago." She stated simply.

"What?" Hookshot said, starting to feel equally bewildered. "How?"

Curiosity well and truly piqued, Jetstream straightened, bringing herself to her full height.

"That's what I want to know. And while we're planetside, we'll have a slagging good look for Steele. The

perfect excuse." She smiled.

"To us, maybe, but to Krusher?"

"I can persuade Krusher to let us go."

Hookshot regarded her with curiosity, wondering how long it would take her to get her own way. Not long, he reckoned, going by her past performance onboard.

Muborthia - Chemdar Meadows

The rain had finally been outran, left to its own devices back to the east. The little organic, having finally calmed down somewhat, was running ahead in the vast expanse of flowered meadow, cartwheeling and bouncing through the near waist high colourful plantlife. The strong, sweet scent played havoc with Steele's olfactory sensors. The girl hadn't spoken much, just made gestures in which direction she wanted to be going. Now, he was in his natural, bipedal form, trailing after her, leaving a trail of flattened flowers in his wake. Red optics tracked the girl as she bounced from one patch of the strong smelling weeds, to another. When she came to a large patch of tall, purple ones that reminded him of the flat tipped antennae used for inter-planetary communications back on Cybertron, she stopped. Kneeling down carefully in the patch of wild flowers, she ignored Steele completely, her awe and fear of the hulking machine temporarily forgotten as she sank deeper and deeper into her own little world. Steele stopped a few yards behind her. If he got too close, he found, she'd start panicking again.

How ungrateful. He muttered in the now blissfully painless space of his mind. *You save someone, then they ignore you. Or try and do a runner.*

The trust between organic and machine was fragile at best, so he opted to keep his distance, unless he felt surcumstances dictated otherwise. He watched on in mild curiosity as she plucked one of the tall purple plants from its resting place in the ground. She put it to her dark face, and inhaled deeply, tears forming at the corners of her eyes. If only one or the other could understand each other's language, then communicating would be going alot more smoothly. When the girl started to sob softly, Steele knelt down, a large hand propping himself up as he leaned forward. He recognised the noise to be a form of showing sorrow. Why was she crying because of this particular plant? The others had no such effect on the little organic as far as he could tell. But then, he wasn't a botanist or a therapist. He was just a Constructicon, doomed to fight and build things for the Decepticons.

When she continued to cry, Steele leaned back on his heels, hands resting in his lap, optics scanning the area. Still no one about for miles. Which frustrated him. He knew these organic creatures needed sustenance on a daily basis to continue functioning properly, but it was something he could not provide, and he guessed that the little cord-tie bag she had with her wasn't bottomless. It was actually looking slightly less bulky than the night before, when he found her near the flooded valley. Birds flitted low over his head, chirping and singing happily in the noon sun. He wondered if he could cheer the girl up. The sooner she regained herself, the sooner they could be on their way again. He looked about, scanning their immediate surroundings. A few feet to his left, was another thick patch of wild flowers that ranged from the tiny yellow to the large, oddly shaped vivid blue. He reached over, and with more delicacy than anyone but his own kind would expect, caught a small bunch of flowers between forefinger and thumb. Pulling them from the ground, roots and all, he offered them to the miserable young organic. It took her a moment to notice the offered flowers, but a single word question from Steele that sounded to her more like a low pitched buzzing laced with foreign words, he gained her attention. She looked to her left and saw the massive, deep purple metallic hand there, flowers clamped gently between a thumb and finger. She looked at them for a moment, then she shifted her position as her gaze slid up his arm to look at

him fully. Instead of finding the menacing red optics she saw the previous night, she saw what she thought was slight worry forming on the perfectly interlocking metal plates on his face. She looked back at the flowers, where her gaze lingered a moment longer, unsure of how to proceed. Then she gingerly reached for them, avoiding touching the metal of his hand, instead wrapping her long, slender black fingers around the emerald green stalks. As she gripped them, he let go. He removed his hand, and proceeded to sit with his hands in his heavily armoured lap. She looked at the flowers. Only a few around the edges were broken. Understandable, given his large size. She sniffed the flowers, a small smile forming on her lips. Wiping away the tears, she added a few of the tall purple flowers that had made her cry to the bunch the alien had presented her.

Now feeling thoroughly puzzled, Steele watched as she did so. Keeping a grip on the flowers with one hand, she stood up, sweeping her cloak to one side with the other so as not to step on it. *Why keep the ones that make you sad? Makes no sense...* He puzzled silently. Jennah finally made herself have a good look at the metal figure who knelt in the grass and flowers before her. He watched curiously as she carefully eyed him up. Overhead, a large bird of prey screamed. Steele looked up at the strange noise that split the silence. Jennah did the same. Pointing at the hovering bird, she said something. Steele looked at her, then back at the bird she was pointing to. She said the word again. Steele articulated the word and said in his mind. Once satisfied with his pronunciation, he said it outloud. The girl nodded, a broad smile coming to her face. Steele then knew he was on to something, just as she thought the same thing. She pointed at herself and said her name. Again, Steele mulled over the pronunciation for a moment before attempting to say it. First time, she shook her head fervently. Second try, she nodded, pointed at herself again and repeated her name. Then she pointed at Steele. His mind went blank, processor suddenly and unexpectedly emptying of all thought. He knew what she wanted. She wanted his name, but he didn't know enough of her language to figure out a way of saying it so that she would understand it, much less pronounce it herself. Seeing no other options, he said his name anyway, hand on chest plate. The single word sounded like nothing she'd ever heard, much like everything else he'd said. She made a face. Steele gave an electronic sounding sigh. Jennah sighed also. Then she pointed at the flowers and said something. Again, Steele repeated the process. The girl nodded, smiling once again. Steele spent the rest of the afternoon following the small organic through the meadow and listening, taking note of what she pointed at and logging the correct words and pronunciations in his memory. Much to his surprise, the girl was a patient tutor. *Maybe another member of her family unit was also a tutor...* He mused as the girl continued.

15 - Ourobourus

Solstice

"Wait, just run that by me again?" Speeder asked, finding himself increasingly nonplussed.

"Ourobourus." Raid replied evenly, with all the patience of a teacher. "Basically, when this world ended, it started all over again. I don't know if the same things are going to happen the same way they did before, but according to the data we've retrieved from this satellite and the data we received from the LDP before we lost contact, this piece of technology belongs to the people of this world. Its uses, apparently, are for transmitting public media such as television shows and news broadcasts."

Speeder thought hard, processing Raid's explanation, picking it apart then logging it for future reference. "If we go planetside, we wouldn't have a disguise, would we..?" Blue Falcon asked slowly.

Raid shook his head slowly.

"Very doubtful." He replied.

"I should think a pair of cars would stick out like, er, what was that phrase..? A sore thumb?" Deadmetal said as he walked onto the bridge, Gundog following closely behind.

"As would a massive tank and two military grade choppers." Gundog added, casting Raid a quick look, before positioning himself back in his cubby hole work station.

"If that's so, then we need to locate Galaxy and Flashpoint." Speeder said.

"I'm now working on the scanners." Blue Falcon replied, his fingers flying across the keyboard of his console. "But something on the planet's blocking my signal from getting in."

"Wait, you mean we can get a signal out, but not *in*?" Gundog asked, mildly puzzled.

"Apparently so." Blue Falcon replied as he continued to work.

Deadmetal turned in his chair and proceeded to help Blue Falcon with his work.

There was a solitary bleep from behind Speeder and he turned, looking the newly arrived data stream over.

"Uh, Raid, sir..." He said slowly.

Raid re-directed his attention from the ship's large array of sensors.

"The Decepticons are on the move." Speeder said.

"So I see. From the looks of it, they're going planetside." Raid conceded.

Gundog eyed his own screens up, typing furiously away.

"It looks like a Constructicon and a Seeker." He said.

"I know the Constructicon." Deadmetal said pointedly. "But not the Seeker."

"Where in the slag did she come from?" Blue Falcon muttered, obviously unimpressed by the new recruit on the Decepticon's behalf.

Still hooked up to the Solstice's sensory equipment, Raid proceeded to focus on the new bot's facial features. A mild form of knowing raised its head somewhere deep within him. He recognised her, but couldn't quite put a name to her.

"Hmmm..."

"Well? Do we go after them while they're vulnerable?" Blue Falcon asked, turning slightly in his chair and gesturing at the large view screen.

"No." Deadmetal replied bluntly.

"Why not? They're out in the open. They wouldn't stand a chance against our weaponry-" The young

Autobot started. It was Gundog who cut him off.

"Take another, much closer look at your data." He said gruffly.

Blue Falcon hesitated before turning to do so. After a moment's intense study, he saw what the others had no doubt noticed as soon as the information made itself known; the Epitaph was lurking just out of view on the opposite side of the small moon they themselves were using as cover.

"Rivets." He mumbled sourly.

"I'm sure Flashpoint and Galaxy can prove themselves to be more of a handful for those two." Speeder commented.

"I know they can." Raid reassured, a small, dry smile tilting his metallic mouth.

"You're really gonna let Galaxy and Flash have all the fun?" Speeder asked.

"Of course not. But until the Epitaph orbits further away, and we orbit closer to the planet, we're going nowhere, unless circumstances dictate otherwise." Raid announced, leaning back in his chair.

"Wonder what's taking them to the planet...?" Gundog wondered outloud from his station.

"No idea." Raid replied bluntly. "Probably looking for more energy."

"I still say now's the perfect time to take out a couple of Decepticons." Blue Falcon protested.

"Maybe so, but I'm not taking the chances of having the Epitaph open fire on us. Krusher may not find his crew all that valuable, but when it comes to a potential source of energy, he'll protect said source until his spark gets extinguished." Raid said.

"Well, what do we do in the meantime?"

"We wait."

Muborthia - Chemdar Meadows

"I don't have the proper equipment with me to repair this damage." Flashpoint said tiredly as he inspected Galaxy's upper most wing joint.

The large female Autobot grunted something and flexed her fingers as she looked out across the meadow.

"Do you exist to find arguments with every living creature we come across?" He asked as he sat down beside her.

"It's not my fault that these Trolls or whatever they are seem to be attracted to me." She grumbled sourly as small dent in her left arm righted itself with a small metallic *pop*.

Just before they exited the forest, a much larger Troll had lumbered out in front of them and launched an attack on Galaxy. She had suffered minor injuries, a damaged wing being the most prominent and annoying. The mild throbbing in the wing joint was still irritating her, but she smiled knowingly that what damage the Troll had suffered, was to cause it much more pain and long term suffering than she was having to put up with. After all, no one likes to lose an arm, whether it can be reattached or not. Her roaming optics settled on a thick cluster of wild flowers. After a moment, Flashpoint looked at her and noticed her absent stare.

"What're you looking at?" He enquired slowly.

Galaxy rose to her feet and made her way to the area she'd been inspecting from afar. Now with a much better view of said area, she looked at it much closely and with much scrutiny. Flashpoint walked up beside her and went into a crouch also. Both Autobot gazes located the next patch of cruelly flattened flowers and grass.

"Footprints." Galaxy grunted.

"Familiar ones too..." Flashpoint agreed, lightly tracing an index finger around the edges of the foot print

they were currently investigating.

Galaxy brought herself to her full height again and looked down into the grass, switching to a more detailed way of viewing things.

"There's another set of tracks here too." She said. "But they're much smaller and closer together."

Flashpoint acknowledged the second set of tracks she'd pointed out.

"Who, or whatever made these smaller tracks, appears to be going at a jog." He said, his interest growing. "They're definitely organic." He added.

Galaxy gave him a look.

"This blade of grass has some skin fragments on it." He said without looking up.

Galaxy didn't bother arguing. She'd learned along time ago, that Flashpoint had the means of picking up the minute details that others couldn't. It was apart of his job as a medic.

"What would Steele want with an organic?"

"Not sure." Flashpoint admitted as he straightened up from inspecting the tall blade of grass. "I know very little about his habits and personal traits outside of fighting."

Overhead, the clouds parted and a small and sleek fiery coloured air craft darted downwards in a sweeping arc. Both Autobots cast their optics skyward, to look at it.

"Definitely not from this planet." Flashpoint squinted. "I can just about make out Cybertronian markings on its flanks."

"Maybe Steele wasn't alone then..." Galaxy rumbled and shot skyward at an awkward angle, compensating hard for her damaged wing.

The much smaller Cybertronian let out an electronic sounding screech of dismay and banked hard as it saw the deep green and bright orange bulk of the troop transporter coming hard at him in robot mode.

"You're not going *anywhere!*" She growled and her hand shot forward.

There was a sharp, super heated burst of exhaust flame and she snatched her hand back as the heat suddenly became dangerously intense against her armoured hand.

"*Don't injure him too badly!*" Flashpoint transmitted urgently.

He had no idea whether she heard him or not, or was just plain ignoring him. He decided to settle on the latter.

The small craft made another hard bank and Galaxy faltered in her trajectory, almost flailing to a mid-air halt, wing joint complaining painfully.

"*I don't see a faction logo.*" She transmitted back.

Flashpoint groaned. The smaller bot could be a Decepticon. Or an Autobot. He continued to watch the sky as Galaxy chased the smaller Cybertronian with all the skill she could muster with her damaged wing. The smaller bot was nimble, but as Flashpoint looked on, he was fast learning that Galaxy had more skill than he first imagined, the much larger bot anticipating the newcomer's movements and out-maneuvering them with what seemed like ease. Galaxy swore angrily and she banked hard, coming back on her quarry, her damaged wing creaking ominously and sending a burble of agony up and down her side. The smaller Cybertronian was starting to panic, his movements growing more erratic. He hadn't been prepared for this kind of encounter, and he didn't know what to do. Then something solid hit him from underneath, sending him tumbling awkwardly. Just as he regained himself, Galaxy was already bearing down on him, blue optics glowing vividly behind her visor as she dragged him downward, towards terra firma.

The impact shook the ground hard enough to pass of as a small earthquake. In the midst of the fray that lay hidden in a fresh depression, limbs and folding panels flailed. The craft had changed its shape and Galaxy was now straddling the light red faced form of Solar. Galaxy had him pinned with ease, a large

hand on his chest, holding him place. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't deploy his intergrated weapons properly, or wriggle free. To make matters worse, Galaxy had her free hand drawn back and balled into a fist.

"What's your business here?" She growled.

"Don't kill me!" Solar blurted, still trying to wriggle free of her grip and failing miserably.

"Galaxy!" Flashpoint shouted as he came nearer. "There's no need to take your anger out on him."

Galaxy slowly looked over at the transformed fire engine as he walked up beside them.

"I'm sure there's a perfectly reasonable explanation for him being here." He added. "Remember the tear?"

Galaxy faltered, looked Solar over then removed her bulk from him. Solar looked beyond perplexed and frightened. Flashpoint sighed, armoured shoulders sagging slightly. He descended into the depression and held out a metallic red hand.

"I'm Flashpoint." He said. "This is Galaxy."

"Uh... Solar..." He replied slowly, eyeing up Flashpoint's offered hand suspiciously.

Gingerly taking it, Flashpoint proceeded to haul him to his feet. Solar stood swaying gently when Flashpoint released his grip on the young Cybertronian's hand.

"You'll have to excuse Galaxy. She's not in the best of moods today." Flashpoint apologised. "Had one to many encounters with the local, uh, *wild life* today."

There was a moment's awkward silence, then Flashpoint broke the silence.

"So how *did* you get here?" He asked.

Solar hesitated.

"Through some kind of protal..." He said slowly, serching their armour for any sign of a faction insignia.

There, located on Flashpoint's upper chest, was a tiny red and white Autobot insignia embossed into the metal. Galaxy's was located on the sides of her split vehicle mode fusilage with a further two located on her primary wings, one wing of which, was badly damaged. He felt slightly more at ease. They weren't Decepticons. He hoped....

"Flashing all kinds of colours around the edges, a different world showing up in the middle?" Galaxy asked gruffly.

"Uh, yeah." Was the simple reply. His systems were till buzzing horribly from the sudden impact.

"Was your trip through the tear voluntary or not?" Flashpoint asked. Solar still looked utterly bewildered. "Sorry, but we need to know if there are people back on, er..."

"Cybertron." Solar supplimented.

The two Autobots tried hard not to gape. Cybertron was a long, *long* way away from their current position.

"We need to know if anyone is awaiting word of your successful arrival on this planet back on Cybertron." Flashpoint finished.

Solar shook his head.

"No. Myself and the other members of our village were ambushed by a small squad of Decepticons." He said, adding hesitantly; "My twin sister was one of them. She attacked me and we lost out footing, falling into the tear."

"So your sister's a Decepticon?"

"And you're a Factionless?"

"I've been looking for her since we got here." Solar said, all previous plans of locating Flare long since evaporated.

"What do you intend to do once you've located her?" Galaxy asked.

Solar hesitated.

"I don't know..." He finally said, caving in. "If this was Cybertron, I'd follow through with my original plan and persuade her to come back to the village."

"Well, Cybertron's some million light years away from this world." Galaxy said pointedly.

"And whatever tales were spun to make her join the Decepticon forces will be hard to erase, blah blah blah. Yeah, I know. I heard the whole speech and lecture from Wherry and Contrail." He replied miserably. "But it doesn't mean I'm going to give up on her just like that."

Flashpoint and Galaxy exchanged looks.

"How much experience do you have with handling Decepticons...?" Flashpoint asked slowly.

"Not much. The attack that sent me and my sister through that tear was the first I'd ever really taken part in, where I wasn't fleeing." He said.

Flashpoint cast a quick look over his left shoulder and at the tracks left by Steele and the little organic.

"Well, since we're all here, and introduced, we might as well start looking for Steele." Flashpoint said.

Solar looked up.

"Uh, he a Constructicon...?"

"You seen him?" Galaxy asked.

"Yeah. I spotted him the other day with a tiny black flesh creature in the valleys that way." He replied, pointing to the horizon that lay at his back.

"Hmmm... Well, if you want any chance of re-locating your sister, I suggest you help us." Flashpoint said.

"We got our ship, the Solstice in orbit. No doubt our commader and crewmates are looking for us."

Galaxy added.

"No doubt Krusher's been persuaded to do the same thing for Steele by his crew. I know for sure that Hookshot doesn't take too lightly to being seperated from Steele."

"So, you willing to help us and we return the favour? Or are you gonna go your own way and get lost?"

Galaxy asked pointedly.

"We really need an optic in the sky, but one that can follow orders when needed." Flashpoint added.

Solar hesitated a moment. He didn't like the idea of having more Decepticons on their way here, but with two other Cybertronians, who were bigger than he, and Autobots no less, he nodded.

"Excellent. Right now, we're following Steele's footprints." Flashpoint said and set off across the meadow. "And if your sister's a Decepticon, like you say, then there's a chance they may detect each other when close."

"He doesn't mess about, does he?"

"No. It can be quite annoying sometimes." Galaxy replied and set off after Flashpoint as he strode purposefully toward the horizon.

16 - Energon

Solstice

Raid considered carefully. No matter how much detailed information that was pulled from the lost satellite, he was still sending two of his remaining crewmen to an alien planet that currently had no technology for them to scan and copy so they could go undercover. He wasn't comfortable with the decision that was currently forming in the back of his mind. He'd much rather go down to the planet and go and search for Galaxy and Flashpoint himself. Except, that being blind hindered him from doing so, frustrating him to no end. A small thought occurred to one side of the forming decision; Would he ever retain the ability to see again? Or was the damage caused by Krusher too great for any amount of repair work to be done? Pushing that now most common of thoughts aside he gave voice to his next command.

"Deadmetal, Blue Falcon, I want you two planetside. Observe the Decepticons and if they are causing trouble, stop them. You know what your other task is." He said.

"What about us?" Speeder asked, gesturing at Gundog, who turned in his chair.

Raid looked vaguely in Speeder's direction, then Gundog's.

"I want you two to stay onboard with me incase the Epitaph makes any move against us, or the planet." Gundog stared momentarily at his blind commander, mulling the order over. He'd much rather be going planetside and harrasing some Decepticons than be stuck here, onboard the Solstice, just sitting and waiting... He grunted acknowledgment then returned his attention to the instrumentation at his station. He'd been fiddling with the secondary laser cannon output and intended to do the same to as much as the other intergrated weaponry as possible.

Deadmetal and Blue Falcon rose from their posts and made for the bridge exit, heading for the cargo bay. It would be the best area to launch from since the Solstice had its aft to the planet.

Muborthia - Sahla Lake

Yankara of the Naga folk ambled along the edge of the clear watered lake, hues of blues, purples and pinks playing across its surface at odd intervals. He smiled knowingly to himself. He was the current guardian of this lake and its hidden powers that only the ancients knew of, and he intended to stay as its guardian for another several decades to come. A shadow briefly played across its surface diverting his attention skywards. There wasn't a single cloud to mar the blue of the sky. The birds sang as they swooped, catching insects for food for themselves as well as their families. Then he saw it. A metallic object of oranges, yellows and reds, as if the sun had birthed it. It darted neatly across the sky, banked hard and retraced its line of flight. It was no bird. Birds needed to move their wings to fly, and they couldn't fly at such speeds or heights either.

Yankara took a few steps backward, eyes fixed on the sky, searching for anymore signs of the strange object. Or creature, whatever it was. Then his senses got the better of him and he turned and ran for the small, fortress styled building that sat at the end of a jetty on the otherside of the lake. He didn't stop running until he reached it, slamming the door behind him and locking it firmly with conventional methods as well as magical before proceeding to contact the other elders about his sighting.

Solar came in low, panels and wings shifting and re-positioning themselves as he landed within a clearing of the forest that surrounded the lake that was big enough to accommodate Galaxy's large form. Both Galaxy and Flashpoint looked up upon his arrival. So far, he'd proven himself to be a capable scout.

"I think I was seen by one of the locals." Solar said anxiously. "An organic wearing layers blue material." "What was his reaction?" Galaxy asked, then shot Flashpoint a sour look as he touched upon an exposed wire.

Since their arrival, the large Autobot had made a habit of attracting the local igneous life forms, earning herself many dents, scratches and scuffs. The last tussle with one of the Trolls resulted in one of her side panels being torn free from a vital part of her being. Energon still trickled down her side, staining the ground she was sat crosslegged on whilst Flashpoint was doing his best to patch her up.

"Uh, he turned and ran into a structure composed of rock." Solar replied slowly. Galaxy was indeed growing tired of all things rock and her grim expression and posture said so without the words needing to be vocalized.

"I've managed to stop the small rupture and replace the damaged panel." Flashpoint finally said. "But I don't know how long the panel will stay intact with the rest of your armour."

"How's your energy levels?" Solar asked, not wholly sure if he should be asking the question at all. Galaxy went silent for a moment.

"Low." She finally replied in a low rumble.

"You need more Energon to replace what you lost in that last tussle." Flashpoint said.

"I know." Galaxy replied sourly. "But where are we gonna get Energon from around here?"

Solar perked up slightly.

"I'm gonna go do another fly by of the lake." He said suddenly. The pair gave him a mildly curious look.

"I'm sure I picked up something odd about it..."

"This is your first time on another planet. I'm sure you did." Galaxy grumbled.

Flashpoint shot her a look and she backed down.

"Be quick about it." Flashpoint said.

Solar nodded once and lept neatly into the air. Staying in his natural robotic form, he flew off across the trees and out into the open above the lake.

The surface of the lake shimmered and life flourished in the watery shallows and depths. Solar marvelled briefly at the sight before something much more important caught his attention. There was something more to this lake than H₂O and organic life forms. There was something beneath the surface. He could just barely pick it up, but it was definitely there. All readings pointed to one thing: Energon. Circling, he made one last scan of the area. There were several caves in the surrounding hills that cut the lake off from the rest of the world. Maybe one of them would lead to the potential Energon source. Solar banked hard and returned to where the others were waiting.

"I definitely think there's something down there, beneath the lake." Solar said upon landing.

"Like what?" Galaxy grumbled.

"I think it's Energon..." Solar replied carefully.

Both older Autobots looked him over slowly as if he'd gone a little mad.

"If there was Energon here, surely we'd have picked it up by now." Flashpoint said.

"I could just barely pick up the energy signature for it whilst flying low across the surface." Solar replied.

"If there *is* a source of Energon down there, how do we get to it? Is there an underwater entrance or what?" Galaxy rumbled, straightening her posture slightly.

"There're some caves in the hills that surround us. I'm sure one of those leads to beneath the lake."

Both Galaxy and Flashpoint moaned. Solar looked puzzled.

"Great. From one cave, to another." She groaned unhappily.

"Could be worse. They could be mines." Flashpoint said.

Galaxy shot him a sour look.

"Right," She said, "let's get looking at these caves."

"What about the organic who saw me?"

"What about him?" She replied flatly as she pulled herself upright with an ominous metallic creak.

"Hang on, Galaxy." Flashpoint said. "I think you should wait here."

She looked down at him, again, not the least bit happy about their current situation and the predicaments it was throwing up on them.

"You're perfectly camouflaged here and there's no telling how big of narrow these caves are. Myself and Solar will go. We'll keep regular contact." He said and gestured for Galaxy to stay and Solar to follow.

Galaxy sat down heavily, sending shockwaves through the surrounding area, arms folded across her chest, a sour look bending her metallic features.

"You better stay in contact." She snapped. "I ain't gettin' any younger an' my Energon reserves ain't gonna re-supply 'emselves neither!"

Solar looked mildly worried but Flashpoint just shrugged her temper off.

"We'll bring as much as we can carry. Assuming it's in a useable state, of course." He said.

Galaxy kept her optics fixed on them as they made their way into the forest, heading for the unnervingly openness of the surrounding hills. She hoped that the young Solar was correct. At this rate, she wouldn't be able to make it off the ground if her Energon levels weren't replenished. She also hoped that there were no Trolls lurking about too...

Muborthia - Third Moon Has'lan

Turbulence stood on the grey rock surface of the smallest moon in orbit of the lush green and blue planet. He looked up at it. He had no idea why Krusher would want to divert to another planet, especially one that appeared to be void of technology. Or technology that was still in use and fully functional, he corrected himself as a lonely and battered looking satellite drifted by. It'd taken him a while at full output to reach this destination and was disgusted by how far the Epitaph had taken him away from Cybertron. He'd also spotted the Solstice orbiting the second of the planet's moons upon arriving. If either had detected his arrival, they didn't take any actions towards him. In fact, it annoyed him in some small and insignificant way that he was being ignored by both Decepticons *and* Autobots. He grumbled something as his curiosity got the better of him. He'd made a quick scan of both warships, and found that both were lacking in crew. Whatever it was about this planet that had drawn their attention, it must be important to require an away mission. He took off, black flames erupting at his back and heels, and he soared planet-ward, moon dust billowing behind him in the low gravity of the over grown meteor.

Muborthia - Kenlaan Mountains

Flare paced circles. She knew her brother was still here, and she knew that Crash and Burnout were now looking for her. Having finally been able to find a place on this low-tech world to find a decent enough signal, she'd been able to send out a message to her base and new commander. Some time later, she'd received a message back. It was static filled, hard to understand, but it was definitely

Crash's voice. What she'd managed to decipher put her slightly more at ease. They were definitely figuring out a way to rescue her, something not often associated with the Decepticons, if ever. But now, as she paced, she was thinking hard. Dare she move from this area? Should she stay in case another transmission was attempted? She had no idea. She hadn't been briefed on what to do in a situation like this. Her first mission as a Decepticon hadn't been an off-planet job. But it had ended, rather abruptly, that way. A slight whining noise from above caught her attention. She cast her frustrated gaze skywards and watched as flames peeled and evaporated away from a sleek black jet. It was of Cybertronian origins, like herself. Hope surged and just as she was about to try and send a message to the newcomer, she halted herself. Decepticon, like herself, or one of the tyrannical Autobots? She looked harder, slowly receding into a shadow against the mountain face as the dark machine came closer and closer. Tattooed on either side of the nose cone and on each primary wing, was a deep purple logo. Then she realised something. The Decepticon that was trailing black fire was heading straight for her. She brought her weapons online immediately, bringing her arm mounted laser weapon to bear. Turbulance transformed mid-flight as he came in low, sliding to a halt on the large outcropping that jutted thickly from the side of the mountain. She set herself up for a shot and the bolt of concentrated energy slammed into his lower chest, sending a crack crawling up his black cockpit glass. He took a step back, a small smile forming on his alloyed lips. She may be small, but it was good to know she was willing to put up a fight. She took another shot at him, this time the laser bouncing off his right shoulder plate, leaving nothing more than a heated scuff. Turbulance started forward. Solar started backing up as much as she could until she came into contact with the mountain side.

More shots were fired, this time the lasers accompanied by an EMP burst. The lasers did very little to his tough armour, but the EMP momentarily stunned him into taking a few steps back, red optics flickering. After a few seconds however, the larger Decepticon shook it off with a mildly irritated growl. Solar swore bitterly. Propshaft was right. Her weapons were indeed too feeble to do any real amount of damage, temporary or otherwise, to a bot any bigger than herself. Turbulance brought his own lasers to bear, a sleek, silver cannon emerging from flipped open panels at the rear of both of his shoulders. They came up and down, focusing their attention on her as Turbulance practically pounced on her, optics flaring angrily. Identical weapons now trained on her head she gave up her wriggling. Turbulance had her firmly pinned against the mountain, looming a good three feet over her. She definitely wasn't going anywhere. He took note of her insignia, the neatly painted Decepticon mask on either of her main wings. The insignia was fading, however, as it was only a temporary measure to allow her new comrades to determine ally from foe. This didn't stop Turbulance from grilling her though.

"What does Krusher want with this world?" He growled angrily.

Solar now felt utterly confused as well as frightened. She *really* wasn't prepared for a situation like this.

"W-w-who...?" She managed weakly.

The reply only served to fuel Turbulance's anger. His grip on her wrists tightened and she repressed a wimper as the armour started to cave in, pressing against the sensitive circuitry beneath.

"*Krusher!*" He repeated irritably. "Your commander who's currently sat in orbit of this world!"

"My commander's Crash!" She replied, trying to add coldness to her voice and failing.

Turbulance searched her metallic expression, looking deep into her fading blue optics that retained the iridescent glow of a Spark. He recognised the name. *Crash....* He mused quietly. *I know you...*

"Is he onboard the Epitaph?" He questioned.

"Epitaph...?" She replied innocently. She had no idea what it was. "I'm just a rookie, I only joined the Decepticons because they rescued me from certain death! They offered me a freedom that being factionless could never offer!"

Turbulance now looked at her curiously.

"How long have you been in the Decepticon ranks...?" He asked slowly but curiously.

"Not long... A few solar cycles I guess... I kinda lost track of time..." She admitted and squirmed again once she felt his grip go slightly lax.

He seized her again just as she was about to wriggle free and she grunted. But with a system flooding relief, she took note that he'd finally put his weapons away.

"Are you here with anyone else?" He questioned firmly.

She hesitated. In a way, she was. Her brother was still about somewhere. But he wasn't Decepticon.

And he still needed destroying. She shook her head.

"You're lying." He said abruptly.

She looked at him, startled.

"What? I'm no-"

"You *hesitated*. You're hiding something." He growled. "Speak up, or I'll take you offline right here and now."

"My brother!" She blurted. "We're twins, and as my first task as a Decepticon, Lord Megatron ordered me to bring my brother's head back to base."

"How did you end up on this world then, without knowledge of the Epitaph and its poor excuse for a crew?" Turbulance pried, still not letting her go. He wanted to know if he could trust her.

She sighed. "We fell through the tear together. That's how we ended up here."

Tear? He thought. "What tear?" He voiced out loud.

"I dunno." She shrugged helplessly. "It just appeared out of nowhere. It certainly wasn't a Space Bridge."

Turbulance sighed. "You still intend to destroy your brother? Why?"

"He left me to die in a fire." She said, her tone suddenly taking on a sour note.

"Ah.." That's all else he needed to know about her relationship with her brother. "Then let's go find him."

"What? If I leave this area, then I might not get a signal through to Cybertron!" She protested as he relinquished his grip on her.

She rubbed at her wrists as he turned his back on her, approaching the edge of the outcrop.

"This world has technology." He said. "There are satallites in orbit. They may be dead, but I bet at least one of them's still got a signal." He said.

"There is no technology on this world." She said slowly, now starting to feel somewhat confused. "I've looked."

"Then we'll look again. Two sets of optics are better than one." He replied, looking back at her over his shoulder. "Let's go." He took off quickly and Solar hurried to catch up.

17 - Mines

Muborthia - Sahla Lake

Jannah sat at the lake's edge, her small, black toes dipping and swirling about in the water. Steele was sat beside her, crosslegged, watching intently. So far, his tutoring had gone fairly well. The girl pointed at a fish lazing in the shallow water nearby, either totally oblivious to their presence, or just plain not caring. She said a word, Steele repeated the process of articulating it in his mind and repeating the word back to her. He got it on the first try and she nodded approvingly with a smile. The only thing that really bugged the Constructicon was the fact that he hadn't managed to translate his name into her language. He knew her name, but she didn't know his. Or at least she couldn't pronounce it with her fragile, organic vocal processors. Steele looked out across the expanse. The area he'd chosen to rest in was a secluded part of the lake, more of a pond really, with a tiny stream from the main body of the lake feeding it. Tall, thick trees surrounded them, shielding them from prying eyes. If another organic of this world saw him, they might not be as forgiving as Jannah. He had found that most young organics were more willing to accept the presence of an alien life form, whereas the more mature organics tended to react either violently or run, screaming. He, personally preferred the ones who ran away screaming. It was somewhat entertaining to watch. Steele reclined slightly, bracing himself with his hands as he looked up into the sky. He idly wondered what it was like to be able to fly under his own power as a pair of tiny birds swept past over head, chirping and singing to each other. Then something else caught his attention. He rose to his feet and scanned the area. This time, his data didn't come back spotless. There were several other Cybertronians in the vicinity. Two registered as Autobot, one Decepticon and two registered neither of the factions. Jannah stood up also, looking at the bulk of the mechanical alien. Steele mumbled something then turned to Jannah so fast she stumbled backwards, thin arms raised in defense.

"Hide." He said in her language.

"Why?" She questioned.

"Not friend to you." Steele said, silently and bitterly cursing himself for his fractured Muborthian.

He made a gesture, as if shooing her into the trees. Jannah hesitated, then when she saw the sleek black object rocketing towards herself and Steele, she turned and ran for the indicated cover. Steele turned and took a defensive stance. There was a factionless following him.

No... Steele thought. *Can't be Turbulance. He was destroyed. I saw the reports myself...*

Turbulance and his smaller follower swooped in low and transformed as they landed, hitting the soil and rock feet first. Steele took note of the factionless. She looked to be about as heavily armoured as Roadtrain and mildly confused. She too, looked Steele over, taking in every dent and scuff, every mar of paintwork and scratch.

"You look surprised to see me, Steele." Turbulance rumbled with a slight smile.

"Last I heard, you were dead. Killed by Speeder." Steele replied slowly, gauging Turbulance's reaction.

Turbulance merely sniffed. He didn't much care for Speeder. As far as he was concerned, that particular Autobot didn't exist unless he showed his metallic face. Turbulance approached him and clapped a hand on his heavily armoured shoulder.

"So tell me." He said, unnervingly warmly. "What's going on with the Epitaph?"

Steele hesitated. He disliked Krusher as much as Turbulance and the rest of the crew did. And the

larger, black toned Decepticon knew it.

"Not much has changed. We still have the Space Bridge, except for one part, and we also have a new crewman...." His voice trailed off slowly at the look on Turbulance's face.

"I see he was quick to replace me." He muttered.

"She claims to be an old friend of his." Steele said. "Though so far, there's been more arguing between the pair than anything. It's like having a second Roadtrain onboard sometimes."

Turbulance couldn't help but utter a chuckle; a low, cruel sound that resonated through the trees and across the lake. Knowing how much Roadtrain hated anything that could fly, the thought of having another, equally tempered Decepticon onboard the Epitaph working under Krusher's command tickled him immensely.

"She's also his second in command." Steele added a little bluntly.

"How's her leadership skills?" Turbulance pried.

"Better than Krusher's, that's for sure. Even he knows it."

"Bet he doesn't like that..." Turbulance almost sneered.

"Not in the least." Steele replied. "So, who's your new *friend*?" He used the term lightly. Turbulance didn't much care for having friends.

"This is Flare." He said.

Flare dipped her head slightly in acknowledgment.

"Found her lurking about in the mountains. Said she came here through some kind of tear in space."

"Lucky you." Steele mumbled. "I'm here because I lost my grip on the hull of the ship." He found he still felt queasy just thinking about it.

"What about your little friend?" Flare asked. "That little organic I saw run off into the woods."

Steele froze. Turbulance's optics were now locked on him. He honestly had no idea what to say.

"What organic?" He rumbled, optics locked menacingly on Flare.

"The one you shoed off into the forest." Turbulance said.

An icy cold spread throughout his systems. He knew what Turbulance was like when it came to organics. If he didn't have a use for them, then they were dead. Steele hesitated again. Turbulance could just be playing along to Flare's observation to see what the Constructicon said, or he really did see Jennah. Steele caved in. He knew Turbulance too well to bother about lying to him.

"It's kinda hard to explain..." He added.

"You've always been soft on the small ones." Turbulance finally grunted.

"Please don't kill her." Steele all but pleaded.

Turbulance looked him over.

"What's her main use to you?" Flare suddenly asked.

Turbulance gave her a mildly approving glance then returned his attention to Steele.

"A guide. Also teaching me the basics of her language."

"Call her out. I wish to meet this organic myself." Turbulance ordered.

Even though the Decepticon had been ousted by Krusher and was technically dead, he still out-ranked Steele by miles, being Krusher's second in command. Or *used* to be his second in command, rather. Steele sighed and turned around. It only took him a few steps to reach the border of trees that surrounded them. Crouching down he scanned the forest as far he could. He located Jennah somewhere near the fore, hiding behind a large, moss covered rock.

"Jennah, come." He said in his fractured Muborthian.

Behind, Turbulance looked on impassively.

"Strange language..." Flare commented, almost to herself.

"If you survive long enough among the Decepticon ranks, you'll come across alot more worlds and even

more languages and cultures." Turbulance replied levelly without looking at her.

Both looked on with interest as a slim organic with skin as black as Turbulance's armour cautiously padded out from the cover of the trees, cloak wrapped tightly around her. She stared up at Steele, then looked over at Turbulance then at Flare, eyes wide. She edged closer to Steele. If Turbulance was going to strike out at the girl, lingering behind the Constructicon's heavily armoured, caterpillar tracked foot was among some of the best places to be. Steele could hold his own against Turbulance. He knew it. He'd done it several times before, in training and otherwise. Jennah looked on, eyes going from alien to alien as they conversed in their own, strange dialect. Then all went silent for a moment. Turbulance smiled down at the girl. It wasn't a pleasant smile, even for a creature who's face was made up of perfectly inter-locking metal plates. But then, Turbulance hadn't been able to get along very well with that particular concept for many years. At least, not since he'd joined the ranks of the Decepticons.

"Do you feel that...?" Flare said quietly and slightly uncertainly to no one in particular.

Turbulance and Steele looked at her.

"Feel *what*?" Steele asked.

"Raw energy..." She muttered and wandered closer to the water's edge.

Crouching down, she peered into the crystal clear liquid and watched the small marine creatures go about their daily business. She also watched as the sheen on the surface melted from a faint purple into a faint pink. A small, organic noise from the vicinity of Steele's foot sounded out. Steele looked down at Jennah. He gave a slight, reassuring nod and the girl spoke up.

"There are some old crystal mines in this area." She said.

All three mulled over the sentence, comparing the words to the already accumulated and articulated words that Steele had shared with them.

"Most organics believe that crystals contain some kind of power." Steele explained to the mildly puzzled Flare.

"Ah." She said. "If this is true, is there anyway we can utilize this power?"

"It depends. We'd need to get a look at this potential power source to find out." Turbulance mused. Then he turned to Steele. "Where are these mines?"

"Mines?" He asked Jennah.

Jannah paused at the one question query, then pointed in the direction of the closest hill, nodding.

"There"

Turbulance understood the gesture and the word very well without having to query any of the data that Steele had accumulated during his time there.

"Then we'll go and investigate. Bring the girl with us. She could prove to be useful if the mines are too narrow for us." Turbulance ordered.

Steele didn't look non-too pleased with the idea of sending a tiny, vulnerable organic down into a mine. He knew the dangers of mines all too well, and he'd rather not think about them ever again. He looked down at Jennah who returned his gaze, albeit it was a slightly puzzled one.

"Come." He rumbled softly then scooped the girl up.

It would be easier for him to walk through the forest, rather than make his way there in his alternate form. A digger would have a hard time coping with the forest floor.

"I'll stay with Steele and the organic." Flare said. Now she was among her own kind again, she was interested in seeing a bit more of this planet, except this time, from the ground and not the air.

"Very well. Just don't dawdle too much. Krusher won't stay in orbit for too long. He isn't known for his patience." Turbulance said and took off, soaring over the canopy and towards the nearby hill that boasted a handful of square openings.

Steele and flare started through the forest, disappearing into the gloom and out of sight as a pair of heavily robed organics appeared.

"We're too late." Yankara huffed.

"I fear they may be after the power of the ancient ones." Damarus the Grey stated somberly.

"That which lays hidden beneath the lake?"

Damarus merely nodded slowly.

"And with the king too busy playing war in the far south and our brothers performing their own, pressing duties, I'm afraid that we are on our own against these Demons." Damarus said.

"Dear Gods... I hope we have the strength to pull this off." Yankara muttered unhappily.

Who knew what powers these creatures of the otherworlds possessed. The very thought of such things sent ice up and down the Sourcerer's spines.

Muborthia - Mines

The bright glow of alien crafted headlights lit up the innards of the widening mine shaft. *Whatever they were mining down here, must've required alot of muscle.* Flashpoint mused as he looked around at the multiple cart tracks that had been warped out of shape in some places by years of neglect. Tools and piles of discarded rock, lanterns and bundles of ropes and cables still littered the old shafts. Though the tunnels were growing wider, they weren't getting any higher, thus forcing Flashpoint and Solar into a stoop that sometimes turned into a crouching shuffle. The transformed fire engine looked over at his new found Cybertronian cohort. The further into the mines they explored, the stronger the energy traces were growing. Now Flashpoint could feel the flow of raw energy too.

"We're close..." Solar mumbled quietly.

"Good. The sooner we find it and analyze it, the sooner we can get back to Galaxy. It's getting more and more difficult to get a transmission through to her, and I'll be slagged if I'm going to let her go this easily."

"She seems tougher than she looks. I doubt she'll give up without a fight."

Flashpoint nodded and ducked beneath a roof support beam and stepped out into a massive, hand carved chamber. Solar stepped up beside him and let out a small whistle of awe.

"This place is huge..." He said.

"Eh. I've seen bigger..." Flashpoint said levelly.

Solar gave him a look.

"Our Earth base was in a mine network." He stated flatly then cautiously edged a little further out into chamber.

Neither had picked up any other lifeform, except for those that one would expect to be living underground in such a cramped environment. Surrounding them, carved into the curved walls of the chamber itself, were several other passageways, all leading off in different directions. A cluster of battered old mine carts were situated on a turntable styled device in the centre of the room, each track leading away and disappearing down each tunnel of varying sizes. They walked around the edges, examining each tunnel entry carefully. Eventually, they came to a single conclusion; The eastern tunnel was the most promising. A few feet into the mouth of the smaller tunnel there were strange plants and growths jutting out of and clinging to the rock. The plants seemed to glow and iridescent light pink and purple. Flashpoint studied one of the plants a little closely, plucking it from its anchorage on a shining crystallised rock and holding it just before and optic.

"Energon..." He mumbled. "To feed these spores, it must be in its liquid state."

"Great! Right...?" Solar said a touch hesitantly.

"It is if it's easy enough to get to." Flashpoint said then headed down the new tunnel, hoping and praying

neither of them would get stuck.

Sahla Lake

Galaxy looked over her shoulder awkwardly at the sound of tree being felled. She froze in place, hoping that it wasn't another Troll. Then she relaxed at the sound of familiar voices.

"Why not fly? It would've been quicker-" The sound of wood breaking, then the voice continued. "-And easier."

"Our flying forms aren't the quietest. If we could fly without the aid of rotar blades, then fine. But we can't risk exposing ourselves. And driving is out of the question too."

It was Deadmetal and Blue Falcon; young arguing with old, a familiar sound. How she missed her random squabbles with her Mini-Con partner, Rifle. She cast the thoughts and memories aside and heaved herself up into more of a sitting position. She hated to appear weak, even to her comrades.

"The sooner we find Flashpoint and Galaxy, the better." Blue Falcon grunted.

"You've already found one." Galaxy stated out loud, her voice carrying through the thickly clustered trees with ease.

Blue Falcon was the first to emerge, Deadmetal appearing a few moments later. Both had twigs and leaves attached them, sticking out from joints and seems between their armour plating. Blue Falcon picked at a twig, plucking it from an elbow joint and tossing it away.

"Where's Flashpoint?" Deadmetal asked.

"And what happened to the LDP?" Blue Falcon added curiously.

"We don't know. It followed us through the tear, then promptly left. I couldn't keep up with it." Galaxy said, giving an experimental wiggle of her damaged wing and instantly regretting it when she winced.

"What happened?" Deadmetal asked, stepping out into the clearing.

"Sentient rocks." Galaxy muttered sourly.

The two smaller Autobots looked at her curiously.

"We've come to the decision of calling them Trolls." She supplimented.

"Y'mean, those big, ugly, carniverous things that people claim to be a myth back on Earth?" Blue Falcon asked.

"Yeah, except these ones are made of rock and have a temper worse than Juggernaut." She rumbled primly.

Blue Falcon had no idea who Juggernaut was, but Deadmetal did. It wasn't a pretty thought...

"Where's Flashpoint?" Deadmetal asked again.

Galaxy looked at him blankly. Then promptly remembered, her optics flaring brightly behind her deep blue vizor.

"Gone with Solar - a new kid and very much unexperienced - to investigate a potential Energon source up in those hills." She gestured with a massive hand at the nearby hills.

Deametal and Blue Falcon looked in the gestured direction. Indeed, there were openings carved into the slopes over there.

"Falcon, you stay here with Galaxy. I'll go look for Flashpoint and the new guy."

"But-!" Blue Falcon started. He was promptly cut off by a low rumbling sound emanating from the hills in question.

Deadmetal eyed him, and he backed down.

"Keep us informed, 'kay?" Blue Falcon said instead of his complaint.

Deadmetal then darted off in the direction of the hill. He'd be there in no time.

Jetstream looked down into the tunnel that had suddenly decided to open up beneath herself and Hookshot. The Constructicon was lay sprawled on the rock floor below, dust and debris settling around and atop him as Jetstream hovered above, looking down at him with mild concern.

"You okay?" She asked.

" 'm fine..." Hookshot mumbled as the wavering static cleared from his vision.

The sudden and unexpected impact had shook his systems, but thankfully, nothing was seriously damaged. There were mild dents in his armour at his back and also permeating his confidence somewhat. He pulled himself into a sitting position and looked around.

"Looks like an old mine..." He mused, picking up an old, rusting shovel then casting it aside like a twig.

"Big too. There's enough space for me to move down here!" He exclaimed as he stood up a touch unsteadily.

Jetstream joined him, sinking into the ground through the hole, carefully landing just behind him, so as not to cause anymore collapses.

"Whatever the organics were mining down here, it must've been big business." She said, looking around at the masses of tracks.

"D'you feel that...?" Hookshot suddenly said, breaking the moment of serenity they'd found themselves in.

"Hm?" Jetstream paused in her examinations of their immediate surroundings and stood and listened, probing with every one of her sensors. "Interesting..." She said slowly. "This is something I haven't felt for quite some time."

"It gets stronger down this way." Hookshot said. "If my brother landed in this area of the world, like us, then he'd have sensed this too."

"Let's go investigate. If this hunch of ours proves true, then it could come in handy." Jetstream said and gestured for Hookshot to lead on.

18 - The Lake

Sahla Hills

"This place goes on forever!" Hookshot stated rather irritably.

Jetstream looked over his shoulder as they stopped at a sheer drop. The rails were broken off and hanging some meters out into the air above the cavernous pit.

"That's one hell of a cave-in..." She muttered admirably.

"There's more of them glowing plants." Hookshot pointed out.

Just off to their lower right, clinging to the rotten sleepers of the tracks, were the pale pink and purple glowing plants. Jetstream bent down and picked one, examining it carefully.

"Definitely getting closer." She said. "The potency in these plants is getting stronger."

"So, which way do we go?" Hookshot asked, searching the darkness for another tunnel.

Jetstream did the same. It was starting to look as if they were at a dead end when she pointed to the ground floor. Obscured by the rubble of the cave-in that had taken away the track's stability, was another tunnel entrance.

"There." She said.

Hookshot groaned. Being incapable of flight, there was only three options for his descent. One: He could use his crane arm and hook to absail down, two: He could let Jetstream fly him down and three, the much less palatable option of jumping. He carefully gauged the distance from their current position to the floor. Then he shifted position slightly and looked over his shoulder and at Jetstream. He was still bigger than her. There was no way she'd be able to get him down without incident. He settled on searching the surrounding area for anything that could hold his weight for an absail. Espying an old steel girder lodged into a carved, square hole in the wall, each of its ends embedded into rock, he unreeled his cable.

Jetstream took a few steps back, confusion building, then quickly resolving itself when she realised what he was doing. He swung the solid, alien forged hook as if it were a lasso, carefully aiming for the girder. Once he was confident that he wouldn't miss, he threw his hook, the tough cable zipping after it with an odd metallic sound. The hook hit its target, and Hookshot gave an experimental tug. The hook gripped the girder firmly.

"I'll wait until you reach the bottom, then I'll release your hook and join you." Jetstream said.

Hookshot nodded, even though she didn't need to do such a thing. He'd done this sort of thing many times before without help, but he didn't argue. It was nice to have someone to back you up. Especially if you knew they weren't going to kill you when your not looking.

Bracing himself, Hookshot swung from the overhang, keeping his legs stretched out, bracing for impact. He hit the opposite wall feet first. Grit was shaken from somewhere above his head and there was a slight, but audible metallic groan. He hazarded a look down and instantly wished he hadn't done so. It was a long way down, and if he fell from this height, even he'd have a difficult time recovering from the impact with the debris covered ground below. He loosened his grip on his cable slightly and started to carefully lower himself, praying he didn't put any unnecessary strain on the old steel girder. Jetstream looked on as the Constructicon carefully lowered himself to the ground below. He was just a little over halfway there when there was another, horrible metallic moaning. It was the nasty little, drawn out sigh of metal slowly buckling under pressure. Hookshot looked up just in time to get a face full of grit and pebbles. He ignored the grit that clung to the lenses that covered his sensitive optics and continued

downwards, gradually picking up his pace of descent. Then the girder gave one last pained moan and gave way, one end pulling free of the rock face, pouring small chunks of debris onto Hookshot's head with a series of irritating clangs. His hook slipped then abruptly stopped as it came into contact with stone covered end of the girder that had pulled free. Hookshot didn't stop. He continued downwards, adamant that he would touch down before he fell. Only the girder and rock had other ideas. His hook slid through the stone, scraping away more debris and dust and came free, plummeting downwards along with its shocked owner. He heard Jetstream shout something as she swooped from the outcropping, powering after him. She had to pull up though. Hookshot was falling too fast for her catch up. He hit the rock riddled ground with a solid, metal bending *Clang*, the steel girder quickly following suit. Jetstream landed beside Hookshot and bent over him.

"Hookshot?!"

" 'm 'kay..." He mumbled, optics dark and unfocused.

"How bad's the damage?" She could see the damage on the outside, but not inside.

There were several deep dents in his armour, a few of which were pressing firmly and painfully against some sensitive circuits and the armour on his lower left leg had been torn open by a protruding steel pipe. Hookshot stayed silent. Panic registered in Jetstream's processor. Then as quickly as the panic flourished, it vanished as Hookshot's optics flickered, then started to glow again.

"Thank Primus..." She sighed.

"Don't think I can move right now." He muttered. "My stability system appears to have taken the brunt of the fall...."

There was loud metallic *bang* as one of the larger dents popped out, righting itself.

"Gimme a few..." He said.

Jetstream sighed and settled onto a large boulder that had fallen from the ceiling some years ago.

"I hate places like this..." Flare muttered uncomfortably as she looked at her cramped surroundings. Having Turbulance directly behind her didn't exactly help her nerves either.

"The sooner we locate the Energon, the better." Turbulance said. He wasn't particularly fond of mines either.

"Why so eager to get into Krusher's good books?" Steele questioned. Jennah was perched on his shoulder, clinging on to his bulky armour as best she could.

A devious smile slid across the Decepticon's metallic lips.

"So I can get close to him again." He sneered.

Flare cast a quick glance over her shoulder. She was definitely feeling more uncomfortable now. What she'd heard of this Krusher so far, wasn't good, and she dreaded going to the Epitaph. She just hoped that Crash and the others would figure out a way of re-opening the tear before that moment arrived. And they'd have to be quick about it. She wasn't looking forward to meeting Krusher at all. They rounded another corner then came to an abrupt halt. There were more of the strange, Energon fed plants clinging to the rock. Indeed, the mines were starting to look more like a garden. Jennah inspected a flower that was hanging from the roof. Its petals glowed a pinkish blue and it smelled... It smelled odd, the scent tickling her nose, forcing her to sneeze. All optics landed on the girl and she promptly tried to bury herself in Steele's armour out of embarrassment. Up ahead, there was a crashing sound, like metal colliding with rock.

"Your brother?" Turbulance questioned.

Flare shrugged helplessly.

"If you say there's an Autobot ship in orbit too, then it could be them." She said.

Steele swore. Jennah gave him a puzzled look. They moved on, more cautiously this time until they

came to a three-way junction.

"Right?" Steele asked.

"Left." Flare insisted.

"If we're lost down here, I am not going to be impressed." Turbulance grumbled bitterly.

"I know it's down here." Flare said levelly as she moved on, gladly taking up the lead instead of Steele, putting the Constructicon and the organic between herself and Turbulance.

"I can hear something odd...." Jetstream mumbled.

Hookshot, now sat upright and fast recovering from the fall, looked around, listening intently. There was indeed something odd sounding coming their way.

"Organics..." Hookshot rumbled after a moment.

Jetstream looked at him and gave an approving nod. The two Sourcerers had just appeared at the mouth of the tunnel the two Decepticons had emerged from just as the pair fled into the partially buried tunnel, quickly dislodging rocks, rusting metal girders and rotten wooden beams so they could squeeze through the gap. The two Sourcerers looked into the pit, eyes following the globe of light they'd thrown into the darkness.

"There's something down here." Damarus the Grey said.

"Definitely. There is no questioning it. This area has been recently disturbed." Yankara of the Naga said, gesturing at the broken stone opposite where a support girder had once been.

Their eyes then fell upon the floor far below them where the ball of light slowly started to fade out.

"We descend now and find out what these creatures want with our world." Damarus stated.

Yankara nodded in agreement. Both said a string of ancient words under their breath and stepped off the ledge. The hems of their layered robes billowed gently in a non-existent breeze as they slowly and carefully levitated to the rubble floor below. Upon touching down, both eyed the hastily excavated tunnel warily.

"We are not far off from our goal now. I can *feel* it." Yankara said, almost to himself.

"As can I, brother." Damarus conceded.

They carefully moved on, disappearing into the blackness that enshrouded the tunnel ahead of them.

Deadmetal looked at his surroundings carefully. He'd been following the tracks left by his comrades, the occasional footprint in a rare patch of soil, scratch marks gouged into the rock at moments where the tunnel narrowed suddenly. He considered himself lucky to have found the tracks after having determined that he had come into the mine network via a different entrance. He rounded another corner and immediately came to a three-way junction. He halted and inspected his immediate surroundings very closely. The tunnel to the right occupied the markings of his cohorts. The tunnel to the left did not. *Slag...* He moaned inwardly as he recognised the vague footprint. He was pretty sure it belonged to Turbulance. And there were two other sets along with his. Turning to his right, he headed down the steep slope his comrades had taken.

Solar followed Flashpoint closely, eyeing up the thick plantlife that now seemed to be flourishing all around them in the mine shaft. Something crunched underfoot and Solar paused and inspected what he'd stepped on. Crushed beneath his weight, a small excavation machine lay in ruins. Flashpoint turned awkwardly in the cramped space and inspected the machine.

"This definitely ain't right..." Solar muttered.

"Quite. This type of machine shouldn't be in a time period like this. They're still using wooden projectiles." Flashpoint agreed. "This looks to be something reserved for a technologically advanced society."

"As in, futuristically speaking...?"

Flashpoint nodded.

"It's one way of putting, yeah." He replied.

"I get the feeling we'll be seeing more of this kind of thing..."

The pair continued onward, down the tunnel, unaware that they were not alone in the mines. And neither party knew that they were being pursued.

"Dear Primus..." Flare gasped as she looked over Steele's shoulder.

Turbulence made his way to her side from the rear of the small exploration party to peer at what was ahead. His reaction was much the same as Flare's, Steele's and Jennah's. Even though the organic had no idea what the abundance of glowing liquids and crystal formations meant to her mechanical companions, she was still awed by the sight. She tapped on Steele's grimey helm and pointed at the decent sized lake of Energon. Steele managed to pull his optics away from the glorious sight and cast a sidelong look at the girl who was clinging to his shoulder.

"Energy for us." He said in his best Muborthian, his hand clanging gently against his chest armour.

Flare went into a kneel at the lake's edge and dipped the tip of an alloyed red finger in, swirling it about gently and bringing it to her mouth.

"Well?" Turbulence asked slightly impatiently.

"It's already distilled and ready for use." She said softly, a smile spreading across her metallic features.

"Must be why there's so much machinery down here." Steele murmured. "D'you think this lot could be more technologically advanced than they're letting on?" He questioned, knowing that Jennah couldn't understand a single word of Cybertronian.

Turbulence went silent. The question proposed by the Constructicon was indeed an interesting one.

"They were technologically advanced at one point." He replied. "But things appear to have gone backwards..."

"I can hear someone!" Jennah blurted.

All optics went to the small organic and she shrank down a little.

"There is someone coming." Flare supplemented. "Sounds organic... No... Mechanical..."

"Both." Turbulence grumbled and turned around, vanishing back around the corner from which they'd come.

"This is incredible!" Solar exclaimed as he looked at the lake of Energon.

Flashpoint rose from his crouch and nodded.

"It's been a long time since I've come across naturally occurring Energon." He said as he delicately chipped a small chunk off of a nearby crystal growth that was protruding from the carved wall of the mine shaft.

"I've never seen it." Solar continued. "Heard of it, but never seen it."

"This Energon's ready for use. Someone's processed it already." Flashpoint said absently. "Which is strange, since there's no record of this world in the archives."

"Okay, enough procrastinating. Fill up yer tank so we can get Galaxy back on her stabilizing servos again." Solar said abruptly, peeling his gaze away from the underground lake.

"We also need to get word of this cache to Raid and the others." Flashpoint said, unravelling one of his

two fire hoses and snaking the tip into the lake.

"How much can you carry without hindering yourself?"

"Enough to accommodate Galaxy's current situation." Flashpoint replied as he concentrated on filling his main water tank up.

Solar watched as Flashpoint did this with curiosity. He'd never come across armour like his before. His own armour was the brightest he'd ever seen up until meeting the old medic.

"What kind of vehicle mode do you have...?" The young Cybertronian enquired cautiously.

"It's a fire engine from Earth, the last planet I was assigned to with my friends. And, yes. I know what you're thinking. And the reason for the bright colours and lights is to get every other road user out of the way so the vehicle and its operators can get to the emergency in time."

"Occupants...?"

"Organics. They have many more vehicles on their world, some for warfare, others for everyday uses. And each one is controlled by an organic."

"So there's no one on that world like ourselves?"

Flashpoint shook his head.

"No. Not anymore, at least. We all left. Tactical re-call due to the world's lack of fuel resources. They'd used it all up and the weather systems had become so erratic, we couldn't make much energy out of that source."

Flashpoint then proceeded to reel his hose in and tuck it back away neatly in its compartment.

"Right, let's get back to Galaxy... Do you hear that?"

Solar tilted his head slightly.

"Voices." He replied quietly.

"Turbulence."

"And my sister!"

Flashpoint took ahold of Solar's arm and started guiding him back out of the mines.

"We leave quietly. If a fight is gonna break out, I'd rather be outside, away from the mines and the Energon and have Galaxy fully functioning. Now move." He said quietly as he ushered Solar back up the mine shaft.

Solar only hesitated a moment before complying. He knew how dangerous Energon could be, and starting a fight near a large source of it would be beyond lethal. He knew this from personal experience and he didn't want to experience that again.

19 - Meeting

Sahla Hills

Hurrying as fast as they could back up the mine shaft they'd come down, Flashpoint and Solar collided with Deadmetal with an unnervingly loud *clang* that echoed throughout the mines.

"*Dee!*" Flashpoint exclaimed. "What're you doing down here?"

"Looking for you two." He replied, looking Solar over before turning his optics on the weighed down form of Flashpoint.

"I've got some Energon for Galaxy. We need to get out of these mines." He said hurriedly.

"There's three Decepticons down here with us. Turbulance, Steele and someone else."

"My sister." Solar muttered, slowly becoming increasingly frustrated with her.

Deadmetal gave a him a long look before turning and heading back the way he'd come. Upon re-entering the cave with the three-way junction, all Autobots came to another abrupt halt. Stood before them, equally as surprised, were the two Decepticons, Jetstream and Hookshot. The Constructicon looked a little worse for wear, but he was still standing and fully alert.

"Oh..." Was the only word spoken for a long moment, and it was spoken by Jetstream as she slowly looked from Autobot to Autobot.

"We continue onwards." Deadmetal insisted and stepped forward.

Both Decepticons took a defensive stance, as no one dared to use any of their weaponry in such an unstable and confined environment. Jetstream and Hookshot edged backward slowly as the three Autobots encroached on them. If a fight erupted down here, then there would surely be a cave-in. And neither took a shine to the idea of being buried under hundreds of tonnes of rock. Especially when their was Energon at risk.

"Okay..." Jetstream started, hands raised, fingers fanned in what she hoped was a non-threatening posture as she awkwardly walked backwards up the twisting, debris strewn incline of the mine shaft.

"Neither of us are looking for trouble. We're only here to find Steele..."

"Decepticons that ain't looking for trouble?" Solar snorted. "That's new."

"I've never heard of such a thing either. Unless they want something badly enough..." Deadmetal said slowly.

"And that thing is Steele." Hookshot said, almost tripping over as his damaged leg gave way beneath him.

Jetstream caught him and helped him right himself.

"Seriously. Neither of us want any trouble. We just want Steele." Jetstream protested as coolly as possible.

The three still forced them back. The pace was slow, but the main chamber was just around the corner.

"Demons!" Shouted an organic voice.

All optics, red and blue, rotated and fell upon the two Sourcerers who were stood in the partially caved-in tunnel mouth.

"Great. Just what we need..." Flashpoint muttered.

"Ignore the fleshlings. We'll search for Steele later." Jetstream announced and unleashed an EMP on the three Autobots, who promptly went down in a mildly paralyzed alien metal heap.

She grabbed Hookshot by the crane arm attached to his back and hauled him toward the exit where

Damarus the Grey and Yankara of the Naga scattered off to the sides as the two Decepticons forced their way through. Jetstream looked up at the ledge from where they'd descended from earlier.

"How d'you suggest we get up there?" Hookshot asked.

To tell the truth, neither had quite thought their exit plans through properly.

"Grab ahold of the ledge and I'll help speed your ascent up." She ordered brusquely.

Hookshot didn't hesitate, complying instantly, swinging his hook and throwing it as hard as he could, hoping his hasty aim was accurate enough.

There was the tell-tale *clang* of metal colliding with rock and Hookshot gave an experimental tug on his wire. It was holding. He looked at Jetstream and nodded.

"Ready."

"Right, let's go." She said, grabbing his arms as she flew up by him, tugging him along with her, her propulsion system straining hard to hold the Construction's weight as well as hers.

As they rocketed for the exit, the two Sourcerers ran back into the room, a set of fireballs erupting after them. One of the balls of fire missed, but the other struck and evaporated harmlessly on Hookshot's heavily armoured foot.

"My fire did nothing to it!" Damarus exclaimed as the two metallic apparitions vanished into the next mine shaft.

"Aye. And we still have three more to deal with!" Yankara sounded non too pleased with this revelation. The fire was one of their strongest spells, and for it to have no effect on a target, never boded well.

"We need to get out of these mines and into the open. At least then we will have a chance of escape if anything goes horribly wrong." Damarus stated as he clambered into the middle of the chamber.

"I do not feel I can teleport out of these mines. I do not wish to re-materialise inside a wall." Yankara stated as he hurried after his brother of magic.

"I know that feeling all too well, brother. That is why we are escaping the conventional way. Almost, anyway."

At a few words, the two Sourcerers cast their levitation spells. Deadmetal, Flashpoint and Solar tumbled into the chamber and watched the two organic's ascent with fascination.

"That's something you don't see everyday...." Solar said slowly.

"Slag." Deadmetal hissed. "We got more company." He said gesturing at the tunnel they'd just fallen out of.

"We need to get out of here." Flashpoint said.

"Solar, grab an arm." Deadmetal ordered.

Solar did as told, getting a firm grip on Flashpoint's right arm whilst Deadmetal took his left, rotar blades spread evenly behind him. With a sudden burst of flame, both took off and landed roughly on the ledge. Up ahead, the two Sourcerer's were running, hopping over felled support beams and old mining equipment, their robes flapping at their ankles as they moved. Flashpoint stayed on all fours momentarily. Deadmetal and Solar looked down at him cautiously.

"Don't worry..." Flashpoint said. "I'm not going to violently explode..."

"You really did fill your water tank with Energon..." Deadmetal said slowly.

The voices of the other Decepticons were steadily getting louder and closer. They were arguing about something, but neither of the Autobots hung around long enough to find out what it was they arguing over.

"And I still say that the best way of transporting the Energon safely is through Krusher and Roadtrain!" Steele persisted.

"What happened to the shuttle?" Turbulance asked irritably.

"It er... Broke..." Steele muttered slowly.

Jannah listened to the alien argument, taking in all the movements of those around her. She really didn't like being down in the mines, but then she didn't want to be left alone either.

"*Broke?! What d'you mean broke?*"

"An asteroid field. Roadtrain isn't the best for piloting."

"That explains alot." Turbulance grumbled.

Jannah tapped the side of Steele's helm again and pointed toward the mouth of the tunnel as they approached it.

"Voices." She said simply.

All three Decepticons went quiet as they listened.

"Autobots...." Turbulance hissed irritably. "They're everywhere I slagging go!"

Turbulance ran the rest of the length of the mine shaft, leaving Steele, Jannah and Flare behind, mildly puzzled about the last part of his outburst.

"Uh, I guess we follow before he does something he regrets...?" Flare suggested helplessly.

"I don't think he's ever done something he regrets in his entire life..." Steele mused and continued on, Flare in tow.

They burst out of the hillside, Flashpoint, Deadmetal and Solar in hot pursuit. Hookshot was running as fast as he could and Jetstream was trying to keep an even pace with him as she flew over head. She really wasn't keen on the idea of being ganged up on by two angry Autobots. Relief swept through her as she neared the thick forest. If she could land in there, then it would hinder any chances of an attack. She transmitted this to Hookshot who was running as fast as he could down the die of the hill. Multiple laser and heated plasma shots rushed past her. She looked over her shoulder to see a small Cybertronian jet and an Apache gunship flying after her, guns blazing. She swerved, dived and rolled, trying to avoid as much of the shots as possible. Much to her relief, Hookshot took a chance to open up his own weapons on the pursuing pair. He only paid the briefest moment of attention to Flashpoint. The medic was in vehicle mode and tearing down the hillside, cloned diesel engine roaring loudly. He was fully loaded, and Hookshot knew it. Solar and Deadmetal banked hard as plasma and EMP shots tore skyward from the ground. Solar unleashed several shots in the Constructicon's direction, but Hookshot had already dove off into the cover of the thick forest, trees swaying and collapsing under the sudden intrusion before going steady once again as the massive invader got his bearings on his new surroundings. Jetstream quickly followed suit, banking hard into a roll and vanishing into the thick green canopy. Both pursuers broke off, swearing as their quarry escaped. Below, Flashpoint had broken to a halt and was carefully transforming into his natural, robotic state. Solar transformed mid-air and landed behind him and Deadmetal landed fully transformed beside him.

"You get a hit in?" Flashpoint asked as he righted himself.

"No. I don't think so." Deadmetal said unhappily.

He hated missing his targets, and he would've gladly continued the two into forest if it weren't for the thickness of it and the fact that Flashpoint was currently carrying a delicate load.

"C'mon. They can wait until later. We need to get to Galaxy." Flashpoint said and trudged off into the forest.

Galaxy leaned against her rock, large arms folded loosely across her chest. Blue Falcon stood beside her, looking up into the clear sky, wondering where the others had got to and if they were doing okay. He

cast a look to Galaxy. She still had some dents in her armour and her wing was still hanging loose a fraction from the strut. Needless to say, she didn't look at all healthy, even for a being made up of mechanical components.

"How y'holding up?" The triple changer asked after a moment.

Galaxy didn't reply for a few minutes, then she turned her head, vizor rolling upwards to reveal her faded blue optics.

"Ah..." Was the only thing Blue Falcon could mutter.

"I feel like scrap." She rumbled unhappily, her strong, commanding voice belying the state of her health. Somewhere within the forest, trees snapped and swayed and voices could be heard. Familiar voices. Blue Falcon sent out a transmission, and nearly bounced about with glee when there was an instant reply. A transformed fire engine, Apache and a Cybertronian jet stumbled into the clearing.

"We got some Energon!" Flashpoint announced, grinning and utterly worn out. The day's excursion had taxed his own energy supply, but at least his wasn't leaking out all over the place.

"Woah..." Deadmetal said slowly as he looked Galaxy over.

"What?" She asked brusquely.

Deadmetal shrugged as best he could with his earth styled armour wrapped around him and proceeded to carefully answer the big fembot's question.

"Just rarely see you with your vizor up, that's all..." Was his carefully put together reply.

Galaxy grunted as Flashpoint bore down on her like an over-bearing nurse-maid. She really didn't like this kind of attention, but it was necessary, especially if she wanted to make it back to the Solstice in one piece.

Casting his optics skyward, Solar watched as Jetstream took off at a vertical, exploding from the forest canopy. Not long afterward, Turbulance did the same, Flare following suit. Solar muttered something to himself and Deadmetal cast him a look before guiding his own optics skyward to watch the retreating Decepticons. No. Not retreating. They were only going back to the Epitaph for one thing, and that thing involved Energon.

Muborthia Orbit - Epitaph

Roadtrain sat at his station, guiding the warship around the moon either in a state of mild fixation, or a border-line comatose state, running the Solstice in circles. If the Solstice adjusted course, then the Epitaph did the same. And everytime the ships came within range of each other, all hell broke loose. So far, no serious damage had been done. The shields on both Autobot and Decepticon warships were holding firm as were the remaining crews. Whilst Roadtrain had the more mundane task - or at least he deemed it mundane - of piloting, Krusher was in full control of the weaponry, unleashing the wrath of the various intergrated weaponry upon the Solstice everytime he saw it. A lone beeping, a noise that sounded as bored as he felt, suddenly cried for Roadtrain's attention. There were three targets comming up on the Epitaph from the rear.

"We got company." Roadtrain announced as he studied the radar.

Krusher checked his own radar, switching to an aft bound camera embedded neatly into the hull, invisible to all, but those who knew it was there. His optics flared an angry red and he clenched one massive fist.

Roadtrain didn't bother paying attention, instead keeping all his concentration on the task at hand.

"*Turbulance....*" Krusher growled menacingly.

Roadtrain's head snapped around.

"What?!"

Krusher glared at the transport.

"Open the bay doors." He demanded, rising from his chair.

"Do it yourself, I've got enough problems here!" Roadtrain snapped irritably.

Krusher growled.

"Now!"

Roadtrain made a rude noise in the far reaches of his vocal processors and set about unlocking and opening the cargo bay doors before quickly returning his attention to his meager piloting skills.

"Bridge is yours, Ensign." He grumbled and strode from the bridge, leaving the now seething Roadtrain behind to man to ship by himself.

"Ensign? *Ensign?*! I'll give you slugging *Ensign* you worthless bucket of bolts!" The transport chief screamed after the receding bulk of his commander.

He hated being called Ensign with a burning passion and Krusher knew it.

Down in the cargo bay, Jetstream was the first to touch down within the black hold. Turbulance and Flare soon followed, albeit a little more cautiously. None of the lights were on and the only things they could make out were the surrounding piles of metal crates, the door and each other as silhouetted figures with burning eyes.

"I'd have expected a welcome party." Turbulance muttered.

"There's only myself and Roadtrain here." A low, growling voice said from the shadows.

All optics fell on the area from which Krusher's voice came from and a pair of red optics appeared from behind a large crate. The lights flickered on, revealing the crate cluttered space in its entirety. Flare took a small step back as Krusher started slowly towards them. Turbulance didn't move an inch. Instead, he just locked gazes with Krusher and smiled slightly.

"It's been a while, *sir*." Turbulance said with an emphasis for mild sarcasm.

"That it has, Second..." Krusher replied slowly. "What brings you back? I'd have assumed you'd started a new lease of life now you're no longer of the Decepticon ranks."

"I'm still apart of Megatron's army, and that's never going to change." Turbulance replied coolly. "I'm just here to hitch a ride back to Cybertron."

"What makes you think I'm going to let you stay onboard my ship?" Krusher growled.

"Because I have something you need to succeed in your original mission." Turbulance replied conspiratorally. "The Teleport Modulator."

He produced the device from its hiding place within his cockpit chest cavity and held it before Krusher.

"Thief!" Krusher bellowed, raising his fist to strike the smaller Decepticon.

Turbulance waggled his finger mockingly.

"Before you proceed to beat me into spare parts, let me say this: I have something you need. I also have the ability to get you into more trouble with the high commanders than you could ever imagine."

Turbulance threatened, replacing the Teleport Modulator back into its safe place. "So, you let me tag along, and I'll keep my vocal processors quiet about your little past *excursions*."

Krusher hesitated a long moment. True, Turbulance knew alot about what Krusher got up to without his superiors knowing, and alot of the information he knew could get him killed. The large Decepticon growled. He was pinned. Turbulance, as far as anyone could tell, had a flawless service history, save for the one little blip that Krusher gladly made up stating that Turbulance had been destroyed in combat for going against the better judgment of his commanding officer. No one on Cybertron knew that Krusher wasn't physically involved in the Carjack incident, so very few questions were asked and he got away with it. Up until now. Now, the Decepticon he'd lied about was stood before him, a small, smug smile on

his metallic lips. It'd take some explaining once he got back to Cybertron. But if he let Turbulance stay for the duration, that particular problem might be eased somewhat. Or so he hoped.

"Very well. But you obey my commands, no arguing, understood?" Krusher rumbled. "And you are no longer second in command. Jetstream is."

Turbulance cast a mildly irritated glance at Jetstream. He still didn't like the idea of being pushed down the ranks, but then, who did? Instead of voicing his qualm outloud, he merely grunted agreement.

"Now, with that out of the way, who the slag're *you*?" Krusher rumbled impatiently, optics now fixed upon the small, sleek form of Flare.

"Flare. I'm new to the Decepticon ranks, sir." She said bluntly and quietly.

"Flare..." Krusher mused. "How long you been with us?"

"A few cycles, sir." She said hesitantly.

Krusher eyed up the fading Decepticon insignias that had been painted on her armour.

"Still not fully initiated?"

Flare shook her head.

"No." She replied.

"What was your first task, Factionless?" He demanded.

"To destroy my brother, Solar." She replied, more assuredly this time, her paling blue optics now taking on a more red hue that seemed to intensify when she mentioned her brother's name.

Krusher saw the reaction and smiled slightly.

"You're small, inexperienced and feeble, but we'll fashion a competent warrior out of you yet." He rumbled, almost to himself.

He turned away and walked for the exit. When the double doors opened, he paused and looked the trio over once more.

"Bridge. Now. I know Jetstream is just itching to tell us all something."

The three exchanged glances and followed Krusher to the bridge, Flare a little more hesitant than the others.

20 - I Claim This Territory...

Muborthia Orbit - Solstice

Raid considered Blue Falcon's proposition. He'd been sent back to the Solstice by Flashpoint and Deadmetal to report to Raid in person about what they'd discovered on the planet.

"A lake of Energon...?" Raid mused slowly.

"And Galaxy's being repaired as we speak." Blue Falcon replied.

"What about the Decepticons? They'll be doing the same as us. They'll be taking from the lake too." Gundog said from his cubby hole.

There was a lax in attack, as the Epitaph had gone out of range, which afforded the remaining bridge crew that consisted of Raid, Gundog and Speeder a moment to listen in on what Blue Falcon was saying.

"In Flashpoint's work room, there's a cube maker. Take it back to the planet and ask Galaxy to load up with as much Energon Cubes as she can carry." Raid said.

"What about this Solar character?" Speeder asked.

"Bring him back with you. We'll take him back to Cybertron with us." Raid said.

Blue Falcon nodded and headed off the bridge, making his way toward Flashpoint's lab. He certainly hoped that Galaxy was up to the task of transporting the Energon.

Muborthia Orbit - Epitaph

Krusher, now back in his chair of command on the bridge of the warship, listened unnervingly intently to the three's individual stories, Jetstream's commanding more of his attention than either Turbulance's or Flare's. Roadtrain also listened in on the ongoing exchange with half an audio receptor. The rest of his concentration was on piloting the ship without crashing it.

"Energon.... Hmm..." The large Decepticon mused.

"And, you're the only one who can transport the amount we require back to the ship." Jetstream said pointedly.

Krusher nodded agreement. Roadtrain turned briefly in his chair and looked over the four. So far, Krusher hadn't shouted or punched someone in the face. It was unnerving, something that was reflected in the way Turbulance was standing, not quite sure whether he should be ready to dive out of the way of a sudden eruption of temper.

"Turbulance. You'll be coming back with me. Flare, you'll be staying onboard with Roadtrain and Jetstream." Krusher said and rose from his chair. He glared down at Turbulance as he stepped from the low dias on which the massive chair was situated. "This is only to prove that you are still loyal to me. Understand?" He growled.

Turbulance nodded once. "Sir." He replied simply and obediently.

The two strode from the bridge, leaving the three remaining Decepticons behind.

"Do you have any training in bridge duty?" Jetstream asked once the other two had left.

"I can navigate..." Flare said unsurely.

"Good enough for me." Roadtrain grunted. "Get yer aft over here and give us a hand. My processor's starting to hurt"

"Roadtrain is our head of transport, but for now, he's acting pilot in Steele's stead." Jetstream said before ushering Flare over to her new position.

Flare looked down at the instrumentation uncertainly. She recognised the majority of the switches, buttons, screens and dials, but a few of them flummoxed her completely. Out of the corner of her optic, she saw Roadtrain grinning. She grunted something then took the seat beside him. The close scan radar gave an informative *blip*. Looking down, she set about deciphering the information that came up on the small screen beside the radar's rounded monitor.

"They're heading toward the planet." She said.

"Good." Jetstream said, settling comfortably into the behemothic command chair. "Now we can concentrate on evading the Autobots instead of doing the grunt work for once."

"Speaking of which..." Roadtrain said, casting a glance at Flare's instruments, "They're now coming over the horizon to our starboard."

"Move up and go into evasive." Jetstream ordered flatly, tapping buttons on the interface that was secreted neatly away in one arm of the command chair.

The ship gave a slight shudder and a lurch as it exited the small moon's low gravity, re-entering into free space. The sleek white form of the Autobot warship Solstice swiftly followed, but the pilot failed to anticipate the Epitaph's next move. Roadtrain abruptly changed course, veering off around in a tight circle, coming back on the Solstice, which in turn banked hard to avoid collision. The shields of both ships flared and rippled as the weapons were brought to bear, once again spearing the darkness of space with laser and plasma fire.

Muborthia - Sahla Lake

A large form descended from the sky, breaking through the clouds, sending them swirling around and away in all directions. Slowly, the MH-47G Chinook came in for a landing. The sight of such a vehicle was completely alien to the inhabitants of the world who witnessed its appearance and its disappearance as it vanished below the tree lined horizon. The two Sourcerers, now completely worn out looked on, listening with all intent as the massive machine went suddenly quiet. Damarus cast Yankara a worried look.

"What was it?" Damarus asked, undeniably worried about what the strange machine might portray for their world.

"I do not know, brother. Maybe the Demons brought it here. Possibly it carries more of them." Yankara guessed helplessly.

"If it does carry more of these metal monsters, then we must find a way to stop them from whatever they are planning, and we must do it *now*." Damarus insisted.

"The king did not listen to us the last time."

"No, but maybe his brother will."

Yankara didn't know what to say. The king's brother was considered a mad man by most, spending the majority of his life shackled in a dungeon on the outskirts of the kingdom.

"His highness will have our hide if we do-!" Yankara started to protest. Damarus raised a hand to quieten him.

"I know too well the consequences of asking Ivran and his brigands for help, but do you know of the consequences if the Demons are not stopped?" Damarus countered flatly.

Yankara considered for a moment, then nodded slowly. He wasn't warm to the idea being suggested, but they really had no one else to turn to, and that frustrated the pair of them to no end. Yankara heaved

an unenthusiastic sigh.

"Then let us go and encounter the fiend before these otherworld monstrosities do their damage." He said, waving a hand at the horizon on which the large, deep green metallic machine had vanished into. Damarus nodded once.

"How's your magic?" He queried.

"Good enough for quick transportation." Yankara replied, cupping his hands at chest level.

Damarus the Grey did the same, and with a single word from the both of them, they vanished.

Krusher looked on impatiently. Hookshot, Turbulance and Steele were slowly piling up the Energon cubes ready for transportation. But the speed in which they executed this was not the main focus of his bother. It was the organic who sat by the mine entrance, legs folded, perched atop a rock, looking the Chinook over, taking in every detail of the vehicle. He disliked the way in which the tiny, black skinned organic mildly resembled Roadtrain with a great intensity. The transport chief often took up a posture much like the girl's whilst sat down on something other than his chair. Krusher compared the size of an Energon cube to the girl. There was no way she was going to be able to shift them. She was far too small and inadequately equipped to perform such a task. So much for keeping her busy...

And if it weren't for her being Steele's pet, he'd have destroyed the child upon sight. She wouldn't have even seen what was coming. There was a mumbling and grunting that emanated from the crooked mouth of the mine, mercifully distracting the Decepticon's train of thought. Hookshot shuffled out, the tear in his leg having been bolted together thanks to Steele's pet, having retrieved some old maintenance equipment from a small, half caved-in side room about half way into the mine. Proper repairs would have to be conducted back on Cybertron.

"Sir, we've gathered all we can for now. We daren't risk further detection by the Autobots." Hookshot said, gently placing a glowing cube of Energon onto the top of the pyramid pile.

Steele emerged behind, carrying his Energon cube, Turbulance following suit, another Energon cube in hand. Turbulance paid no heed to Jennah who sat by quietly, watching with a curious mix of mild interest and fear. Even though Krusher had shared the satellite's information with his crew, Steele hadn't had a chance to properly introduce himself to Jennah, instead proceeding with the fuel collection through fear of being taken offline. But now, he had a chance whilst Krusher doled out orders. Once again, himself and Hookshot were to stay planetside, whilst Krusher and Turbulance were to take the Energon back to the Epitaph before coming back for the Constructicons. The three Decepticons formed a line, Steele beside the Energon pile, Turbulance in the middle, just in reach, then Hookshot beside him, ready to load the cubes into Krusher's hold. Steele picked up the first cube and handed it to Turbulance, who passed it onto Hookshot. Jennah looked on, watching the impossibly smooth movements of the mechanical aliens with fascination.

"My apologies, Jennah," Steele said, passing along another glowing cube, "but I have only just fully learned your language." Another Energon cube was passed down the line to be re-stacked in Krusher's hold. "My name is Steele."

"I can understand you!" Jennah squeaked excitedly.

"Don't falter in your actions, Steele! I wanna get off this miserable rock as soon as possible!"

Turbulance snapped in Cybertronian.

Steele didn't flinch at the harsh tone, but Jennah did.

"Ignore him. We all do." Steele said lightly, a grin forming on his metallic features as he passed another cube along.

Turbulance grunted something in retaliation.

"Who is he?" Jennah asked. "And where do you come from? Is it far away?"

"Too many questions at once! Don't hinder his progress organic, or you'll suffer!" This time it was Krusher growling, the angry Muborthian words sounding out from somewhere within the large helicopter. Another cube was passed along.

"The one beside me is called Turbulance. And the one we are loading up is our commander, Krusher." Steele bent down to pick up the last Energon cube, whispering conspiratorially; "They're both lacking in the sense of humour department."

Jannah giggled, her hands going to cover her mouth. Turbulance passed the final cube along to Hookshot, glaring at Steele about the whispered comment.

"Mind your vocal processors Steele. I may have problems with my sense of humour but I have *none* with my audio receptors." Growled Turbulance.

"Enough!" Krusher rumbled irritably. "We go back to the Epitaph now. The sooner this is done, the sooner we can leave permanently. Hookshot, Steele. Guard the mines. No Autobot is allowed to enter. Understood?"

Before either could reply, the Chinook's rear doors heaved shut and the large chopper took off quicker than should've been possible, Turbulance in tow, but keeping his distance. The two Constructicons and Jennah watched them disappear into the clouds. Then Jennah returned her attentions to Steele once more.

"So?" She prompted. "Where do you come from? And who's the other one?"

Hookshot walked up beside Steele, going into a crouch before finally settling down in the thoroughly trampled grass, injured leg outstretched. Hookshot wasn't as keen on mixing with organics as Steele was, but still, that didn't stop other cultures from fascinating him. It was a horrible mix of curiosity and loathing. Steele settled down beside him, sitting cross legged, hands on his armoured knees.

"This is Hookshot. We're both Constructicons from the planet Cybertron." Steele said. "We work for Megatron, who leads the Decepticons."

"You should pray he doesn't come to this world." Hookshot rumbled.

"Why?" Jennah asked innocently, blissfully oblivious to the leader's cruel outlook on life.

"He's possibly one of the cruelest beings in existence." Hookshot replied.

"Thankfully, Cybertron is far, far away." Steele reassured at the girl's worried look.

Though his words didn't reassure himself, they seemed to reassure the small organic a touch.

"If it's so far away, then how come you are here?" She asked, puzzled.

"Our crew gets sent away alot. Mainly to secure provisions for our race as our war continues on." Steele said.

"War..? Who're you at war with?"

"Anybody and everybody that gets in Megatron's way. Mainly the Autobots." Hookshot said dismissively.

Jannah opened her mouth to say something, but a single ball of fire streaked across the darkening sky to land with a solid *thump* in the hills beyond. Hookshot and Steele rose to their feet. Jennah recognised the meteorite for what it really was. She'd seen Steele land upon her world in such a manner some nights ago. Both Constructicons scanned the surrounding area. Only one Autobot had shifted from the small clearing, and he was now in the process of unfurling his limbs and bringing himself to an upright and wary stance in the hills beyond. Steele exchanged looks with Hookshot.

"I'm not going over there." Hookshot protested, gesturing at his damaged leg.

"What? Don't tell me you're frightened of a little Autobot?" Steele prodded in Cybertronian.

"The only Autobot that I'm frightened of is currently sitting over in that clearing, immobilised." Hookshot said, jabbing a large, deep metallic purple finger toward the tree line.

"The *only* Autobot who frightens you?" Steele asked. "What about the likes of Ironhide? Cliffjumper?"

Opti-

"Shut up!" Hookshot punched Steele in the arm forcefully. "Agreed that I *never* want to have another run-in with those again. And I *definitely* don't want to have to fight off Galaxy when I'm in this condition. I barely made it out alive last time..." He said, trailing off into a mumble as he remembered the damaged inflicted upon his crane arm and the rest of his body.

Throughout the whole alien discussion, Jennah had been watching the trees. There was a low rumbling then a light, barely audible hiss. A deep green shuttle with fiery orange markings boosted from the tree line. Jennah squinted as she followed the strange craft with her eyes, examining as best she could the alien scripture that was scrawled neatly beside an almost tribal red mask insignia.

"Look!" Jennah said abruptly and loudly enough to cut into their bickering.

Two sets of red optics rotated behind protective red lenses, following the direction in which the girl was pointing. She was pointing toward the sky, her slim black finger keeping a track on the large craft as it descended into the hills where the smaller Autobot had landed.

"Oh slag..." Hookshot muttered as he recognised the sleek bulk of Galaxy.

"Krusher is going to kill us..." Steele said solemnly.

Now they had to confront them. Krusher had claimed the Energon as Decepticon property and now with the Decepticon property under siege from the Autobots, they had to do something whether they liked it or not. They just prayed that the others weren't there too...

21 - Galaxy

Muborthia - Sahla Lake

The region of Sahla Lake was quiet. Only the occasional burst of soft bird song punctuated the silence that followed the landing of the deep green and fiery orange metal craft within the rolls of the velveteen hills. Much to Galaxy's relief, Blue Falcon had the incentive to start compiling Energon cubes at the mine's entrance of which he'd chosen himself, deeming it the quickest route to and from the secret cache of liquified and crystallised Energon. Indeed he was moving fast, carefully placing the cubes into a neat, glowing stack before turning and running off back into the all consuming darkness of the ageing mine network. Deadmetal, Solar and Flashpoint disembarked from the hold of her vehicle form and wordlessly set about doing the same, heading off into the mines after the fast receding form of Blue Falcon. Galaxy scanned the area, her powerful and varied set of scanners mapping the area as far as she could reach, logging every bump and pothole, every tree and organic abode for at least four and a quarter miles. There was a low, electronic rumbling; Galaxy's equivalent of a growl. There were two Decepticons over the next hill.

"What's the matter?" Came a by-now familiar voice.

"Decepticons." She rumbled quietly.

Solar looked around, pale blue optics searching the immediate area as his internal radar scanned the surrounding area. Indeed there were members of the Decepticon ranks present. He could just barely make out the hidden ID signal the largest seemed to be putting out for his comrades uses.

"What do we do about them?" The young Cybertronian asked.

"We wait and keep a scanner on them." Galaxy replied.

Flashpoint emerged from the mine entrance carrying an Energon cube with Deadmetal and Blue Falcon in tow. Placing the cubes gently on the pile, they looked at Solar questioningly.

"What?" Blue Falcon asked, mildly puzzled.

"The Decepticons are near." Solar replied simply, optics fixed on the horizon of hills.

"Ah, then I say we make haste in getting back to the Solstice." Flashpoint said, picking up two Energon cubes at a time.

Galaxy complied wordlessly, a neat breach in her hull appearing and widening enough for them to get through to stack the cubes and secure them for transportation.

Steele looked around. Hookshot looked impassive, staring into the distance and Jennah sat on her rock, looking up at Steele.

"What's the matter?" Jennah asked, confusion plain on her jet black features.

"The Autobots." Steele replied warily. "They know we're here...."

"But they haven't made a move against us, have they?" Hookshot replied.

"That's besides the point. We're supposed to fend off anyone who attempts to get into these mines. And they're stealing straight from it, just over that hill!"

"And you expect the two of us to go up against four Autobots, one of which happens to be Galaxy, and *fight* them?" Hookshot asked.

Steele hesitated. He wasn't warm to the idea of going up against four Autobots either. He just prayed that Krusher and Turbulance would return soon, otherwise he suspected himself and Hookshot would be

spread across the land in hundreds of tiny pieces. He stopped pacing around in a circle and looked down at Jennah, who's organic issue optics were fixated somewhere on the horizon too.

"There's something coming..." She said absently, bringing herself up into a standing position on her rock.

"Hmm... Agreed..." Hookshot rumbled, even though the word was uttered in Cybertronian.

Steele re-directed his attentions from the imminent pummeling from either Autobot or Decepticon, and followed their gaze curiously. Indeed there seemed to be something coming. Or at least happening. The air, not far from them, was shimmering, as if reality was bending, expanding and folding in upon itself. The air felt mildly electric. Then seven organic shapes stepped through into reality. Two Sourcerers, a ragged looking noble and four equally ragged looking lessers looked across the field from the lakeside, eyes roaming, wide, over the moving bulks of metal. One of the heavily robed men silently worked his mouth around some words, but the only sound to successfully emanate from the delicate vocal organs was one name.

"Jennah...?" Damarus the Grey spoke unsurely.

Jennah hopped on the spot, flailing her arms, smiling broadly even though tears welled in her white rimmed eyes.

"Ivran, if you and fellows ever want to put a start to your redemption, then you'll help rescue the girl from the company of these monsters and take her to safety." Damarus said.

Ivran's mouth creased into a small smile beneath a badly trimmed, neglected beard of grey and black streaks.

"If this does indeed get me out of that blasted dungeon for longer than a week, then I will gladly be of service to you, Brothers." The deceptively young nobleman said. "I'm just hoping you will succeed in distracting these hideous behemoths whilst I get the girl." Turning to his gaggle of friends, he gave a nod and darted off for the brush that rimmed the forest edge.

Hookshot raised himself from his sitting position, placing much of his weight onto his un-damaged leg.

"More fleshings." He rumbled peevishly.

"What're they doing?" Steele sighed.

Neither were in the mood to be dealing with organics. One was enough.

"It's Damarus!" Jennah squeaked happily. "No doubt he's come to take me home!"

Both Constructicons spared the girl a glance. The small group of older organics had disbanded into the trees and neither of the mechas feared them, nor did they bother paying much heed to them. The only one left out in the open was the grey robed man, whom Jennah had called Damarus.

"Are these men some kind of warriors?" Hookshot enquired.

"Not that I know of. I've only met Damarus a couple of times." She said.

A pale body in a worn red and gold tunic shot forth from the bushes and wrapped his arms around Jennah. The Elven man hissed something under his breath as Jennah kicked and screamed, her voice muffled by his veined hand. Steele rotated on the spot, a massive, alloyed fist dropping down, toward the man. Ivran, keeping a firm grip on the wriggling girl, rolled from the path of impending doom and vanished into the trees around the mine mouth. Steele swore in his native dialect. As did Hookshot, which instantly piqued Steele's interest. Hookshot had no liking for the girl, so why was he swearing at her abduction? Then his optics swiveled down to the spot near Hookshot's foot. Another of the robed men along with two men in tunics were going hell for leather at the exposed areas in his ankle, jabbing with ageing swords.

"This one has an intergrated EMP!" Hookshot snarled angrily as another bolt of electricity shot up his already damaged leg, causing the limb to spasm and buckle under him. As he keeled over, his armour

started to rearrange itself, sending the organics scattering for cover as Hookshot doubled up on himself. A large, heavy and undeniably alien machine took his place.

"And you're intending to do *what* in vehicle mode?" Steele snapped as the offending robed organic circled quickly around, nipping with his electricity at Steele's ankles.

On the edge of his anger, he dimly heard Jennah's calls for help and her arguing. Then a large hook slammed into the ground next to him, sending one of the armed men scurrying, another crushed and bloodied beneath its weight.

"DEMON!" Yankara roared, arms in the air, electric crackling mercilessly around his hands. "I DEMAND THEE BE GONE FROM THIS WORLD!"

"BEGONE YOURSELF, PITIFUL FOOL!" Steele roared, deafening all except Hookshot who swarmed around him.

Among the ensuing chaos, none saw the form of an alien space shuttle rocket into the night, vanishing into the cloud cover. It wouldn't be long until the Decepticons could leave this world once and for all either.

Steele stamped a heavy foot, but Yankara dodged neatly, robes flapping about him, a hand shooting out, electricity erupting from his finger tips, striking Steele's heavy armour and dissipating harmlessly. By this point, Jennah was with the remaining men of Ivran's party, Damarus the Grey cloaking himself and invisibly charging toward Yankara to aid him.

"Dispatch the grey one. I will keep the Blue one amused." Hookshot rumbled cruelly.

Steele turned his attention toward the lake. He could see that Jennah was being hauled away by the men, but he also took note of the footprints being created out of thin air making their way toward him. Switching to his rarely used heat sensors, he saw the shape of a man running toward him, hands outstretched at his sides. Steele mumbled something and brought one of his few intergrated weapons to bear. An EMP of his own erupted from the slim barrel of the arm mounted weapon, the waves of crackling electric blues and whites speeding across the ground in an ever expanding yet ever weakening wave of electric. The pulse had weakened to a point where it only felt like Damarus had been knocked off his feet by a wave of manifest pins and needles. The Sourcerer rolled to his feet and shook his head clear, repeating his spell of attack, his cloak of invisibility having been banished by the metal Demon he had in his sights. Steele stooped low and swept his arm out in front of him, taking Damarus by surprise. Nothing that was so big and bulky could move with such fluidity and grace. It shouldn't be possible, he knew as he tumbled back toward the lake shore, horribly winded. But it was possible, and he'd had several of his ribs broken by such a beast.

Yankara saw Damarus being struck by the smaller of the two metallic monsters. He wanted to do something, but he was only one man, and was currently trying not to get crushed beneath the weight of the machine that now trundled across the hillside, long single arm swaying, the thick hook at the tip of the cable whipping about with unnerving precision. Several trees were uprooted mercilessly and flung to one side as if they were naught but twigs. Yankara abruptly changed directions, mind too panic addled to form any kind of defensive cloak around himself as he sprinted toward where Damarus lay, barely moving at the lake's edge. Ivran's party had long since fled with the girl, leaving the two Sourcerers to fight with the two aliens on their own. Yankara stumbled into a kneel, gasping hard for the return of breath and clarity, thanking the Gods for the beast's slowness on its interlocked metal feet.

"Damarus! Damarus!" Yankara hissed urgently between breaths.

Damarus barely stirred, cracking a swollen eye open to peer up at Yankara.

"I fear, Brother, we may have failed..." He said, hazily reflecting upon how hard it was to form words through blood.

"The girl is safe. Ivran took her, did he not?" Yankara asked.

Damarus tried to nod, but there was crack from the vicinity of his collar and he winced, gasping in pain. "Can you move?" Yankara asked hastily, looking over his shoulder and at the two animated monoliths who slowly encroached upon them. Both were now standing upright, one limping slightly, red optics burning through the darkness; burning into their souls.

"... No..." Damarus said after giving a pained experimental wiggle of a foot.

The landing had been rough and awkward. His leg was shattered and a rib had pierced and torn at a lung.

"I will remain here. You must go to find Ivran and escort Jennah back to her father's." Damarus ordered feebly.

"But-"

"Go!" Damarus snapped angrily.

Yankara rose unsteadily and swiftly brought his cupped and shaking hands to his chest, using the last of his magic to teleport some distance away, by some grace of the Gods, landing in the direct area of Ivran and his hastily retreating party.

"Hey!" Yankara shouted and used the last of his energy to run toward them.

He felt sick to his stomach at the thought, but was thankful to not bear witness Damarus the Grey's end. Nor was he present to see the shapes descending from the sky...

Steele and Hookshot ignored the hails from Krusher. Both were too angered to pay much attention to him, instead observing the broken and battered Sourcerer lying motionless at their feet. He was still breathing though. They could see that quite easily.

"What are you?" Steele demanded to know.

There was a wet gurgle that was almost drowned out by the noise of a Chinook coming in for landing.

Then Damarus rotated his head stiffly, using the last of his strength to push himself onto his back.

"I am..." He muttered wetly. "A Sourcerer of the Master Rank..."

The life in his eyes wavered. Steele and Hookshot shared a look with each other.

"Where is the organic called Jennah?" Steele asked sternly.

Damarus gave a bloody smile, red tinted saliva oozing slowly from one corner of his mouth.

"Safe..." He muttered. "You will not hold her prisoner any longer... She is not your pet..."

Steele's optics shuttered to a thin red line, aglow with anger.

"Pet?" He growled in Muborthian. "I would never sink so *low*."

He brought his foot up and slammed it down hard into the ground before him, sending shockwaves through the surrounding area.

"Did you purposely step in that or was it an accident?" Turbulance asked, coming up behind Krusher who had been quietly watching the last of the missed events unfolding.

Steel didn't speak. He merely gave a grunt, wiped his foot vigorously across the grass, smearing gore and material across the ground until he was clean.

"Ungrateful cretin." The Constructicon muttered. "Save one of their own from certain doom and they attack and insult you!"

"Organics are small minded, you should know this by now, Steele." Krusher replied flatly. "Now, get back into the mines and start gathering Energon!"

As Krusher turned to walk back towards the mine, a large figure landed heavily, blocking the entrance, a sly smile creasing her metallic face.

"Oh slag..." Hookshot mumbled unhappily.

"Out of the way female or I'll-"

"Or you'll what?" Galaxy replied mockingly, cutting Krusher off.

Turbulence stood aside with Steele and Hookshot. Like the others, he'd had his run-ins with the large fembot before and would only begrudgingly go into battle against her if needs were high. But now was not one of those moments. They had enough Energon to make it back to Cybertron with some to spare, and so the three collectively decided to watch Krusher take a beating. Unfortunately, Deadmetal, Gundog and Blue Falcon happened to be accompanying her. The three swore bitterly. The Autobots weren't about to back down. At least, not without a fight.

"Hookshot?" Turbulence asked slowly.

"What?" He replied solemnly.

"Try and stay out of their line of fire." He replied nodding toward the two larger Cybertronians.

"Easier said than done." Steele put in sourly as Turbulence rocketed forth, fast closing the gap between himself and Blue Falcon, who stood at the fore of the smaller trio.

The three Autobots scattered, avoiding Galaxy and she lurched forward with more grace than should've been possible, the large female colliding hard with Krusher, rattling his twin sets of rotar blades hard. They toppled to the ground, grappling and punching at one another. Behind, Gundog took to the air, transforming as he arced upwards, unleashing his weaponry onto Hookshot with unnerving precision. Hookshot staggered to one side, mildly surprised by the Autobot's sudden show of tenacity and accuracy, bringing his own weapon to bear, small orbs of plasma tearing upwards into the sky, hastily aiming for the strafing cloned Bell UH-1C. A shot of heated plasma streaked across Gundog's side, searing the armour, but otherwise not hindering his movements. The Autobot gave a whoop of delight. It'd been too long since he'd seen combat. Hookshot was starting to feel even more frustrated. The brief moment of light his last shot had caused, had revealed his foe's paint work, the shark tooth painted nose cone seemingly mocking him from the air. Avoiding a flailing arm, Hookshot set about re-targeting the Autobot, the thick cable gaining some slack in his crane arm. A devilish grin suddenly crept across his metallic features.

Turbulence was taken by surprise as Blue Falcon suddenly developed a long blade of metal, plucking it from his back as if it were nothing unusual. A murderous look flickered in his bright blue optics and as fast as Turbulence had closed the gap between himself and Blue Falcon, the triple changer Autobot had struck out with all his strength, sending the Decepticon tumbling to one side. Krusher's foot shot past Blue Falcon's head, and he struck out again, severing a connecting wire that had been briefly exposed between the armour of the larger Decepticon's ankle. Krusher howled, more in rage than in pain, though pain did register in his main processor, and he bucked, sending Galaxy tumbling off him, revealing the large gash in her shoulder plating. Before either could react, Turbulence was on Blue Falcon, tackling him from the side, taking advantage of his momentary fixture on Krusher who'd brought a large cannon to bear on the Autobot. The two went tumbling roughly out of the ensuing blast's way, the shockwave sending them slightly further. The impact of the scuffle reverberated through the mine shaft and several tonnes of rocks and rusted, age neglected steel girders gave way, sealing the entrance. Turbulence took note of this and anger surged, rearing up, fist brought back, EMP gun being forced into existence. Only, something was wrong. Blue Falcon looked as if he had regained his sanity for a brief moment, amusement flicking across his features before laughter took over.

"What're you gonna do?!" He laughed as Turbulence continued to pin him down against the steep incline. "Zap me to death with a few loose wires?!"

Humiliation budded somewhere deep within Turbulence. He'd forgotten about the trade. He had traded his EMP gun for the Epitaph's co-ordinates. He snarled, ignoring the mild, oddly charming pain of loose wires sparking uselessly, instead bringing his balled fist down into Blue Falcon's face. The fight was

back on track, and neither Autobot nor Decepticon intended on loosing.

Deadmetal had Steele pinned. The Constructicon was squirming and swearing beneath him as his face was ground into the dirt. Then there was a sharp pain in his back, the disgusting feeling of metal peeling from metal. Deadmetal hissed, biting back a cry of agony as pain surged through his circuits in a tidal wave of sparks. Hookshot had heeded his fellow Constructicon's electrified screech for help and had come to his aid, though he was finding it hard to ignore the cloned mini gun rounds that were fast wearing away a certain area of his armour. With a hand either side of the transformed Apache's rotar blades, Hookshot was proceeding to peel away the armour that was solidly connected to Deadmetal's delicate internal metal plating, which in turn was buckling and tearing under the pressure. Deadmetal reeled, bending his body to accommodate the pain, the natural reaction of trying to follow where his armour was being tugged to, but with little avail. His optics flared a violent blue then flickered into darkness as the metal plating was discarded to either side and one of his own rotar blades was torn free from its strutt, instantly being relocated into his back. The shattered rotar blade sliced through internal systems, forcing its way out of his chest in a flurry of sparks and purple lubricants that were vital to every Cybertronian's ability to function. The damage had all but shut Deadmetal down. Steele heaved the unmoving Autobot off him and his red optics appeared to widen in horror behind their protective lenses. Hookshot's leg finally gave way, a flexible, metallic black knee cap flying free with a small splatter of his own fluids. With a howl of pain, Hookshot crumpled to one side, landing awkwardly, his scarred leg almost severed at the knee. There was a screeched transmission between the two Constructicons in a code that they'd developed themselves. Steele didn't hesitate, instead reacting instantly to Hookshot's plan, heaving his hook clear and hurling it upward. Gundog strafed, but Steele's aim was better than Hookshot's and the hook latched onto a door seam. The force of Gundog's movements and the sudden taughtness of the cable pulling down on his armour, sent it buckling and bending out of shape. Gundog swore angrily and unleashed everything he had as he tried to stay in control of his flight path. Only a few of his shots hit home, and he couldn't bring his heavier weapons to bear incase he shot at the still barely functioning Deadmetal of the wrestling form of Galaxy. Both Constructicons gave a hard tug on the cable and Gundog fell, spinning from the sky, landing with dull, metallic *Thump*. Steele was on him before he could transform. Gundog flailed, a fist springing forward from the splitting hull of the gunship, catching Steele on the chin, sending him reeling. Gundog rolled to his feet, vision finally clearing of static, stabilising systems righting themselves. He now stood upright and steady, the mini guns now arm mounted and pointed directly at Steele's head. Steele sneered.

"What, you think I'd go easy on you?" Gundog chided.

He dropped his arms and took a new stance, and the rocket pods that had made their way to his shoulders were promptly unleashed. Steele disappeared in an explosion of heated plasma and wood splinters.

"Steele?!" Hookshot called nervously.

Gundog lept into the air once more and continued his reign of terror from above, primarily circling over Deadmetal's prone form as he shot at every enemy that moved.

Krusher was finding it increasingly difficult to out maneuver Galaxy. The enraged Autobot didn't seem to be wearing down, and the dents Krusher was inflicting upon her thick armour were popping out quicker than he could inflict them. And now his right foot wasn't reacting to his body's commands anymore, leaving him staggering and shuffling, shambling about as if he were about to drop dead at any moment. A split second break in the attack as he narrowly missed Galaxy's left fist gave him long enough to

survey the scene and assess the situation. Steele was barely functioning, Hookshot was immobilised and Turbulance was getting more than he bargained for. And as for himself...? His vision was static filled, his audio receptors crackling and his systems struggling to cope with the exertion.

"Galaxy!" He rumbled, bracing himself for impact as she threw herself at him.

The two collided again and once more, Krusher found himself toppled over, nearly falling into the glistening lake. Apparently the run-ins with the Trolls hadn't fared well with her patience as she ignored his words of bargaining.

"Decepticons rarely live up to their deals!" She hissed, pinning him down. "So shut up, stop yer squirming and go offline without anymore fuss!"

She brought her fist down hard. There was a brief moment of static then darkness and unfeeling swiftly ensued. Galaxy pulled herself from Krusher's body and she surveyed the scene for the first time since losing her cool. Blue Falcon was beating Turbulance away, the Decepticon now putting up very little fight for he looked as haggared as she felt. Steele was laying prone in the trees, smoke rising gently from his chest area and Hookshot was scooting toward him.

"AUTOBOTS!" She hollered. "REPORT IN!"

Static sounded in her head. The blow to the head she'd recieved from Krusher must've knocked her intergrated communications offline. It wouldn't be the first time it had happened since comming to this world. Instead, the voices of her comrades came from all around her.

"Blue Falcon reporting!" He chirped properly from somewhere near the now closed mine entrance.

"Aye, I'm still in one piece and functioning." Gundog said from above. "Wish I could say the same for Deadmetal though... He really does look dead..."

Galaxy searched the area, panic setting in. She swiftly located Deadmetal and strode over to where he lay, Gundog setting down and transforming beside her.

"He's still online." She announced.

"Dear Primus..." Blue Falcon muttered as he joined them.

"We need to get him back to the ship."

"What about the Decepticons?" Gundog asked.

Galaxy looked over at Turbulance and Hookshot who huddled over Steele's sparking body. Galaxy brought herself from her crouch. Both remaining Decepticons went down hard. They didn't have enough time to react to Galaxy's renewed barrage of weapons fire. Once satisfied they weren't moving, she looked at Gundog, calm once more settling in.

"Think you can carry 'im?" She asked gruffly, gesturing at Deadmetal.

Gundog looked down at him, thought a moment then nodded.

"Good. Blue Falcon, you'll be taking Turbulance into orbit. I'll take Krusher and Hookshot." She said.

"I can probably handle Steele too, with Falcon's help..." Gundog added.

Galaxy looked from one to the other.

"Sounds good to me. Let's go."

22 - Resuming Course

Both Cybertronian warships moved further away from the world called Muborthia, leaving it behind with its forgotten technologies. Both ships, Decepticon and Autobot alike, had a common goal in their sights. To reach Cybertron in one piece and neither crew showed any signs of wanting to slow down their pace as they moved further and further into the darkness of space.

Epitaph

Krusher grumbled something, trying to make sense of what was what. He felt a familiar presence looming over him. Two, in fact. Red optics flashed then steadied. He studied the metallic faces above him. Jetstream and Steele, whom still looked battered and torn. Krusher opened his mouth, but was promptly cut off by Jetstream.

"I had to repair him first, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to cope with the repairs that were required." She grumbled sourly, almost glaring at him.

"Wh't 'app'n'd....?" He asked, his speech fractured and static filled.

Every circuit in him was complaining and his central processor was throbbing with all the intensity of a mining hammer.

"You had seven diodes pounded out of you, that's what happened." Jetstream replied simply.

"Autob'tzzzzz.." He crackled angrily.

He tried sitting upright, but something in his back popped and creaked menacingly.

"They're back on their ship." Steele said. "Laughing about us, no doubt."

"'m Gunna...." Krusher said, lowering himself back onto the repair table. "I'm Going t' 'av 'em..." He said, his vocal processors still struggling to pull all the words together.

"You're not doing anything." Jetstream said evenly. "You're going to lay here whilst me and Steele are repairing you. You nearly went offline."

"How'd I get back to the ship?" He asked, puzzled, most of the static having finally cleared up.

"The Autobots brought you all into orbit and left you floating around." She said. "I took it upon myself to bring you all back in for repairs."

"That was very sweet of you." Krusher grumbled peevishly. "What of Hookshot and Turbulance?"

"Hookshot's hobbling around the bridge as is Turbulance." Steele replied.

"We're now heading back to Cybertron." Jetstream added as she fumbled about beneath his armour. She made a sound and suddenly he felt a surge of energy flow through him.

"Better?" She asked.

"I can only feel my left hand." He replied, his body tingling.

"Steele, hold this."

Steele did as was told. Something within Krusher's chest cavity was touched and fixed together and his body jerked, optics flaring angrily.

"Much better...." He grinned maliciously.

"It'll still be a little while longer before you're functioning properly, but your body is starting to heal itself without our intervention now." Steele said.

The two had proven to be more useful than he had first anticipated. He wondered how long Steele had

intended to keep his medical knowledge secret for. He dismissed the thought and let his body go into stasis, systems shutting down for recharge.

"How long 'till we reach home?" Steele asked, averting his attention elsewhere.

"Couple of days if the Autobots and Krusher behave themselves." Jetstream shrugged. "Maybe a few more, since this trip took us some way off our original course."

Steele gave Krusher one last look. The large Decepticon was battered and scarred, and before arriving on Cybertron, he'd have to shed the MH-47G Chinook guise. Steele and Hookshot had already discarded their own Earth disguises for their more favourable Cybertronian vehicle forms. Even Turbulance had done away with his partial Earth disguise.

"C'mon, before Roadtrain finally ends Turbulance's will to live." Jetstream said, ushering Steele out of the room and toward the bridge.

The Constructicon paused momentarily. He had found a small purple flower tucked away in a small pocket like compartment. It was the one Jennah had presented to him, though it now looked somewhat shrivelled and limp. It still held a fairly pungent scent though. He fingered the flower a few moments longer, gently rolling it between forefinger and thumb via its stalk. He then replaced the flower back in the compartment and continued onward down the dimly lit corridor, toward the bridge.

Muborthia - Thieve's Hill

Malak crouched in his porch, arms wrapped firmly around his daughter who sobbed into her father's shoulder. Her older brother, Adraahn was sat in the attic, thumbing a small portrait of his mother. Ivran and his remaining comrades stood in the front garden, watching things unfold. They'd lost two of their group and lost one of the Sourcerers too. Yankara of the Naga stood beside Malak, waiting patiently for the reunion to subside. Finally, Jennah pulled away, wiping tears from her cheeks.

"How did you survive?" Malak questioned, wiping his own eyes.

"I... I was saved by someone..." Jennah replied quietly.

"By whom? One of Ivran's men?"

"No!" Jennah snapped before her father could congratulate an unsuspecting Elven.

"By who then? I wish to thank him for your safe return."

Jennah averted her gaze from his, instead staring at the muddied hem of Yankara's blue robes.

"By a Constructicon." She said quietly.

"A what?" Adraahn asked.

He'd peeled himself away from the attic window and had now joined everyone outside in the fresh morning air.

"One of those Demons." Ivran said, stepping forward. "She told me all on our journey here."

Malak looked down at his daughter.

"A Demon saved you?" He blurted. "For what price?"

"No price." She said, shaking her head.

Malak looked at Yankara for help. The Sourcerer just shrugged helplessly.

"From what she has told us, the monster took care of her through out the storm. It's beyond me what possessed it to do such a thing." Yankara admitted.

"I'm curious as to what they were doing up in those hills." Ivran said, staring off at the horizon, the band of trees a dark, thin line in the distance. "I would like to go back and search for what they were looking for in those mines."

"I'd like to go back there too." Yankara said solemnly. "To retrieve what remains of Brother Damarus."

"I say we should wait a few days before going back though." One of Ivran's men said. "Just incase they're still there now."

"You have no arguments from me." Yankara said.

"I just hope that my brother doesn't have enough time in his little game of war to notice I've been broken out of prison by two of the highest ranking Sourcerers in the kingdom." Ivran said. "He'll have my hide."

"Mine also." Yankara agreed.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Yankara of the Naga." Adraahn said from beside his father.

"He sacrificed himself for the good of the land." Yankara replied solemnly.

"We must have a celebration of his life." Malak suggested.

"And also a celebration for the life of your wife, sir." Ivran said.

Malak nodded slowly, a faint smile on his lips.

"Come, let us go inside. The sun may be bright, but the air is still chill, and you all look worn." Malak said, ushering them inside.

None of them complained. The smell of breakfast boiling slowly over the open fire in the kitchen all taunted their stomachs.

Solstice

Deadmetal sat perched on the edge of the repair table. This was all too familiar, sitting on the edge of said table having something being welded and soldered back into place. Solar had been kind enough to travel back to the planet with Blue Falcon and retrieve the Autobot's missing armour plating. And Flashpoint had also been kind enough to repair him. Again. His systems still screamed in outrage at such punishment, but other than the tingling sensation of being welded back together, he felt fine.

"How much longer do I have to sit here for?" Deadmetal asked, mildly impatient about the prolonged delay in his usual tasks.

"Just one more seem...." Flashpoint muttered.

A strong tingling sensation crawled rapidly up Deadmetal's back and he shuddered, armour and repaired rotar blades rattling slightly.

"There!" Flashpoint proclaimed. "*NEXT!*" He shouted, making Deadmetal flinch.

Gundog shuffled in, fingering an out of shape patch of armour. Flashpoint shooed Deadmetal from the repair table and gestured for Gundog to take his place.

"I'd do what he says 'Dog, otherwise it'll be more hassle than it's worth." Deadmetal said at Gundog's hesitation.

"Park it. Now. I require to do thorough inspections of all crew members after battle." Flashpoint stated bluntly.

Gundog looked mildly horrified.

"I'm not a big fan of *thorough* inspections..." He said slowly. "I prefer a quick once over..."

Flashpoint stared him down and Gundog finally caved in and heaved himself onto the repair table.

"Dee?" Flashpoint asked as Deadmetal walked into the corridor.

Deadmetal turned to the pair.

"Don't forget to download your Earth alt mode. At this rate, we'll be at Cybertron in no time." Flashpoint said.

"I won't." Deadmetal said, feeling much like a child being mithered repeatedly by a parent.

He wandered off, leaving Gundog to the mercies of the medic, heading straight for the bridge. He made a mental note to thank Gundog later for watching his back when he was vulnerable. But for now, bridge duty was calling him as was the harrassment of the new kid and Speeder. It'd been a while since the two

had had a petty bickering match.