

# Transformers: Epitaph

By ShadowSpyro

Submitted: December 28, 2009

Updated: April 26, 2010

*Final part in my Space Bridge trilogy.*

*Transformers (c) Hasbro*

*Gundog (c) Direwolf505*

*Blue Falcon (c) countramseely*

*Roadtrain (c) Flankfire*

*Everything else (c) me*

Provided by Fanart Central.

<http://www.fanart-central.net/stories/user/ShadowSpyro/57434/Transformers-Epitaph>

<b>Chapter 1 - Edge Of The System</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Chapter 2 - Commanding The Commander</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Chapter 3 - Back To Base</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Chapter 4 - Pilfered</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Chapter 5 - Feeling Stealthy</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Chapter 6 - Curiosity And Suspicion</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Chapter 7 - Some Minor Torment</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Chapter 8 - Dropping In For A Visit</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Chapter 9 - Fumbling In The Dark</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Chapter 10 - An Unwelcome Experience</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Chapter 11 - Prepare For Battle</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Chapter 12 - Intimidation</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Chapter 13 - Galaxy's Minions</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Chapter 14 - Sniping The Decepticon Way</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Chapter 15 - Broken</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Chapter 16 - Second Chances</b>	<b>73</b>

# 1 - Edge Of The System

## Epitaph

At least he was only shouting and not taking his anger out physically on the nearest bot to him. It was a small price to pay for getting home. Krusher's ranting had been a staple in the existence of this crew, and if he had a sudden change of Spark and decided to start acting like he actually cared about anyone else but himself, then they'd have serious problems. Or at least, Krusher would. He'd be taken in for re-programming, to try and get his unhinged personality back in check. Thankfully, that wouldn't happen. Not anytime soon, Turbulance mused. *Maybe if I hit him hard enough in the head...*

"--- and I swear, if you don't hand over that Teleport Modulator *now* I will break you apart and use you as spares!" Krusher raged, turning on his alloyed heel and looming over Turbulance.

All optics on the bridge were turned in their general direction. Roadtrain was sniggering helplessly from his corner, Hookshot, Steele and Flare were trying to be inconspicuous in their bid to get as far away as possible from the impending fight and Jetstream just spectated from her post beside the chair of command.

"You'll get the TM when we get to Cybertron." Turbulance replied coolly.

Krusher balled his massive alloyed fists and took a step forward. Turbulance didn't make any move to back off. Red optics locked in on each other.

"*When* you're quite done," Jetstream piped up tiredly, "I'd like you to re-direct your attention to the main screen and foreport."

Krusher growled something unintelligible and hesitantly stalked back to his chair. Settling down, he watched Turbulance move back to his own post beside Flare. Jetstream pressed a button and the foreport buzzed static and switched into a large screen. She toggled the view and a silvery dot appeared in the blackness of space.

"We're here." She said simply.

All leaned forward in their seats, as if trying to get a better look at the silver dot that clung to the center of the view screen.

"At last!" Roadtrain said excitedly.

"It's about slagging time too." Hookshot grunted and reclined in his seat. "I wanna be back to building things, not fighting."

"I just want to be home." Flare muttered.

Turbulance peeled his optics off the screen and swivelled in his chair to face Flare.

"D'you think Crash'll take me on?" He asked.

Flare started. She didn't think that Turbulance had wanted to be re-assigned when they arrived back. Not after hearing about what happened before and after his supposed death. She'd honestly thought that he'd much rather be left to his own devices.

"Uhm..." She faltered. "Probably..."

She wasn't exactly keen on the idea of having to work alongside Turbulance permanently. But then, nobody was. Everytime he was near, she got a mild feeling of impending doom trickle through her circuits.

Turbulance caught her expression and smiled slightly.

"Just keeping my options open. No promises." He said in a quiet tone and set about working at his

station once more.

"Certainly hope he doesn't stick around here..." Roadtrain grumbled.

"Don't worry yourself over it." Turbulance replied smoothly. "I wouldn't stick around here even if, for some perverse reason, Krusher just suddenly happened to be the only Decepticon commander left." Krusher growled something, but his words were otherwise ignored by his crew.

### Solstice

Raid kept an optic on all the system read-outs of the ship. Everything remained at nominal capacity. Flashpoint and Speeder had finally managed to get the energy surges under control.

*"I think we've sorted the problem once and for all."* Speeder transmitted from the engine room. It was a voice only Raid could hear.

*"What do you mean "Think"?"* Raid asked gruffly.

*"It means that we'll need to put the Solstice into stasis dock for a re-fit on the main energy couplings when we get back. We're lucky we're still moving at all, what with the amount of damage Krusher did back there."* Said Flashpoint.

The final leg of their journey back to Cybertron hadn't been easy. Each time they'd got too close to the Epitaph, the Decepticons would open fire with everything they had. So Raid had ordered Deadmetal to keep a distance from the equally battle damaged Decepticon warship that they'd been tailing for several months now after the last shot made direct contact with the Solstice's main exhaust.

*"How long 'till we get back, anyway?"* Speeder asked.

*"If we keep this pace up, two days."* Raid replied before disconnecting the line.

He went back to looking at the bridge through the Optic Visualiser, watching over the goings on through the multitude of cameras that were neatly secreted away around the bridge. He then switched to the outer scanners and focused in on a tiny silvery dot that lurked in the distance. *Almost home.* He thought warmly.

### Cybertron - 301st Decepticon Unit

The room was dimly lit with hidden, deep blue lights running in a series of angled lines within the walls, lending it a sinister, yet strangely relaxing feel. It was a place that was safe from the noise and hustle and bustle of war, sound proofed and windowless with only a set of inter-linked computers as contact to the world beyond. There were two workstations laced with monitors and keyboards, one workstation facing the other with a five foot width separating them both. Sat at one, the spiked form of Crash was busy typing up the day's reports. Utilizing the workstation opposite him, stylus in hand, was Burnout, who was intently manipulating an electronic pad. He paused in his actions when one of his monitors beeped impishly. His concentration was now broken. He gave an electronic sounding sigh and looked about the dark room. It'd taken him the best part of two hours to gather together the concentration to get the less appealing side of his working life done. And now, that concentration had been blown to pieces by his computer telling him what time it is.

"It'll be good to have Flare back among us." Burnout finally rumbled as he tried to get back to working on finishing his reports.

Crash looked at the large Decepticon from across his desk, peering at him from behind the monitor he had been staring at for several hours.

"You have become quite attached to that young female, haven't you?" Crash said slowly.

The large, be-spiked Decepticon gave what passed off as a half-hearted shrug, his thick armour clanging together with the motion.

"She reminds me of the life I had before the war started." Burnout conceded solemnly.

Crash glanced at his monitor and tapped at a few buttons.

"Understandable." Crash replied. "Loosing your entire family unit isn't an easy thing to deal with."

"It is not. Admittedly, I miss my daughter more than any other member of my family unit. Flare reminds me of her on so many different levels, that if I lose her, it may end me." Burnout then twisted his metallic mouth into a semblance of a grim smile.

"Then you'll be glad to hear that the Epitaph has just entered the system." Crash replied.

Burnout straightened slightly in his seat.

"How long until they reach Cybertron?"

"Reports say that the ship's badly damaged and cannot engage its Transwarp drivers. They're running on FTL only, so it'll take them a few days to get here."

Burnout settled back in his seat, rolling his stylus between his large, alloyed fingers, red optics unfocused.

"I've offered that we be the Epitaph's welcoming comitee." Crash added.

"Who commands the Epitaph?" Burnout asked after a moment's pause.

"Some bot designated Krusher. He's had a big loss on the crew front and is only returning with four members of his original crew compliment of thirty. Six, if you count Flare and Jetstream." Crash said, scanning through the information that appeared on the monitor to his left.

"Jetstream...." Burnout mused, rocking back in his chair. "I've heard that name before..."

Crash glanced back up from his own work from across the room.

"Glad one of us has." He muttered. "I've only had the misfortune of meeting Krusher. The remaining mechs on his crew, besides Flare, are completely unidentifiable to me."

"It'll probably come back to me once we meet him."

"Her." Crash corrected. "Jetstream is female. She's an intelligence officer."

"Ah, I stand corrected." Burnout replied, giving a mock half bow in his seat.

### *Nyxen 3 - Bresham - Furman Household*

Julie sat at the cluttered kitchen table, a bag of frozen peas to her left eye to try and ease the swelling and cool the pain that still insisted on lingering there from the previous afternoon. It was one in the morning and the house was dark, her two teenaged children tucked away in their beds, hopefully fast asleep. The only light in the house that remained on was the kitchen light. The greying vixen shuffled through some papers, checking over her signatures, and making sure that they were placed in the correct areas. She looked up, peering through the wide archway and into the adjoining living room as the front door clicked open very cautiously. Then a wirey Fox poked his head into the room, eyes bloodshot, fur ruffled and white shirt creased.

"It's about time you ran out of money." She said as he staggered in, leaving the door ajar behind him.

"Wha-choo say t'me...?" George slurred, ending his query with a slight hiccup.

He swayed toward the kitchen and the stench of alcohol filled the air.

"We need to talk." Julie stated flatly. "Sit down."

"An' why d'we need'ta tawk, hmn?" He mumbled, wiping a paw across one burning eye. "I ain't done nofink wrong lately."

Julie put the bag of half de-frosted peas on the kitchen table, revealing her swollen eye. George waved a paw dismissively and snorted with a haggard grin.

"Pfff, tha's nofink! Yerv 'ad wurse!"

Julie just glared at him as he swayed toward the stairs.

"We'll deal wif dis in th' mornin'." He said with a wide yawn and took the first step towards his bed. Something inside Julie snapped. Her eyes narrowed and an ear twitched.

"George Furman, you will come back in here and park your arse on this kitchen chair or so help me-!"

"Or sho help yew wha?" George slurred with a grin as he leaned awkwardly over the banister to look at her.

Julie clenched her fists. She rose from her chair at the table and took a step forward, eyes locked on his. She then smiled a particularly unpleasant smile.

"Remember a few years back?" She asked sweetly.

George cocked one ear as he struggled to focus on her.

"Remember 'The washing machine tried to kill me?' Hmm?" She said, her grin now twisting into a snarl. George twitched.

"If you don't sign these papers, I'll lock you in the kitchen with it!" She growled, waving the crumpled papers about in front of her as she pointed back into the kitchen with her free paw.

"Are you threatening me?" George said, now feeling somewhat sober.

"You're damn right I am. I am *sick* and *tired* of this!" She hissed, pointing to her bruised eye. "If I don't get a divorce, then I'll leave you to play appliance fodder, got it?"

George backed up and descended the stairs he'd climbed, almost slipping off the bottom step. It'd suddenly occurred to him, that the meek, submissive woman he had married some years ago had finally come out of her shell. And she was angry. *Very* angry. And sat squat and ugly beneath the counter in the kitchen, was the washing machine in question. Spinner watched the next events unfold before his hidden optics and his loathing for the organic called George was upped another notch as he lashed out once again. The run-away Decepticon watched as Julie hit the thinly carpeted floor of the living room. And watched as she stayed there, unmoving.

## 2 - Commanding The Commander

### Epitaph

Everyone onboard the Epitaph was staring straight ahead, red optics fixated on the view before them. Cybertron loomed ahead, the behemoth sphere of battle scarred metal filling the foreport. A multitude of lights dotted the silvery surface of the metallic planet, reassuring them that there was still activity going on down there.

"I can't wait to get off this slaggin' ship." Roadtrain grumbled.

"I can't wait to get back to building things." Steele added.

"I'll just be glad to see my unit again." Flare said.

"I'd voice my opinion, but it'd get me reduced to scrap metal in record time." Turbulance muttered, feeling Krusher's gaze boring into his segmented back armour.

"When do we get to dock?" Hookshot grumbled impatiently.

"When we get the go-ahead from the stationmaster." Jetstream replied.

"That should be anytime soon." Krusher said. "I hope..." He added in a mutter.

All were getting fed up with being stuck within the confines of the ship and were fast starting to get on each others nerves. Roadtrain and Krusher seemed to be suffering the most, with the transporter ending up in the repair bay more than once since they left Muborthia's orbit and the Commander being subjected to numerous EMPs courtesy of the ever calm and annoyingly collected Jetstream.

The comm finally buzzed and a deep, gruff voice cut through the ensuing silence on the dimly lit bridge. "Decepticon warship Epitaph: You are free to dock at planet-side port Delta-Five. Prepare to be escorted in."

The line then went silent. Through the sprawling foreport, a single, much smaller and sleeker ship of deep purple maneuvered toward them.

"Follow that ship and don't mess up." Krusher rumbled.

The area was packed with free-floating debris of all different shapes, sizes and origins. Some was Autobot, other pieces Decepticon. A sheet of charred and twisted white metal with the melted remains of an Autobot insignia imprinted on it bounced off the foreport with a dull *clang* before disappearing upwards, and into the cold expanse of space. Ahead of them, their escort pierced through Cybertron's atmosphere with a flurry of white hot flames engulfing the hull very briefly. The same occurred to the Epitaph, the medium class warship giving a begrudging shudder as it too forced its way through to Cybertron. Lurking ahead, partially hidden beneath a mass of hanging and pinned wiring, cables and crane arms, was the docking pad they'd been assigned to.

The flat surface was decorated by sprawling chars of different sizes caused by explosions. Be they caused by the enemy or not, it didn't fill any of the crew with confidence in where they would be leaving their beloved ship. A crane arm swung out of the way, trailing its chains and cables, allowing them full access. The smaller escorting ship banked and tilted back on its course, heading back into orbit.

"Oh wow..." Jetstream said upon spying the massive crater that had torn away part of the side plating of the docking pad, leaving one side unlit. "Glad I weren't here when that happened..."

Just off to one side of the battered pad, two figures stood, one over shadowing the other. Both wore dark, spiked armour and their red optics were cast upwards, toward the carefully descending shape of

the Epitaph.

"Looks like we got ourselves a welcome party." Hookshot said when he spotted the two Decepticons. "Whatever's happened, I had nothing to do with it." Turbulance put in before Krusher's words could even be properly formed in his vocal processors.

The large Decepticon looked at his subordinate for a long moment and shook his head.

"You're always guilty of something, Turbulance. Even when you're stasis napping." He rumbled.

Turbulance made an odd noise as if he'd just been shot and cast a disdainful look over his black armoured shoulder at Krusher. Roadtrain snorted but ultimately held back his laugh and the comment that'd suddenly risen in his mind.

"Landing gear extended." Steele announced, halting the squabble before it had a chance to arise.

"Five - Four - Three - Two... Touch down." Jetstream said, hidden optics glued to the screen before her.

"Re-fueling lines are in and the Epitaph has been secured down."

There was a moment of silence on the bridge. It all felt surreal. For too long they'd been away from home. For too long they'd been warring on an alien planet. It was, undoubtedly good to be home once again, after spending so many years on Earth.

"Before you all run off to the nearest bar to get hopelessly frazzed on Energon, we still have work to do."

Krusher said sternly as he rose from his seat. "Our base is three leagues away from this port. Updates tell me that it is now right on the brink of Decepticon territory."

"Oh that's just wonderful." Roadtrain grumbled unhappily. "We get home, and we get ambushed by a group of trigger happy rust buckets with diodes for central processors."

Krusher ignored the comment for the moment and got on with issuing orders.

"We need to get the Space Bridge there and re-built as quick as possible. So that means, myself and Roadtrain will be doing the carrying. Jetstream, I want you to fly ahead and make sure everything's secure before we leave. Once there, let me know and we'll move out. Hookshot and Steele, you'll be Roadtrain's escort incase we do get ambushed. Turbulance, Flare. You have yourselves one last job before you get to go about your own business again. You'll be escorting me, since I too, will be heavily laden and will be unable to defend myself efficiently during an attack."

Krusher's expression was enough to beat any protests from the crew into submission. They were so close to completing their task. They couldn't screw up now. Even Roadtrain obeyed with minimum fuss.

All rose locked down their consoles and rose from their stations. Flare hesitated when she caught a proper glimpse of who had been awaiting the Epitaph's arrival.

"C'mon," Roadtrain muttered, shooing the smaller Decepticon away from her seat, "we still got work to do before you can run off back to your own unit."

Flare hesitated a moment longer then finally gave in to the older Decepticon's usherings and followed the others off the bridge and into the cargo hold.

### *Nyxen 3 - Hospital*

Poppy and Lee sat on the large chair beside their mother's bed. An oxygen mask was pulled over her muzzle and there was a large bald patch curling around to her forehead from the base of her ear, stiches lining the garish pink and red tinged flesh that had been revealed. George was outside talking to the doctor in charge, a heated discussion in which neither of the young teenagers cared to hear. He'd done this to her. He'd put her in the hospital. They knew he was making up excuses, trying to wriggle his way out of the repercussions that would surely follow such an incident. Outside, the weather mimicked their mood. Lightening split the early morning sky with brief flashes of white, the rumbling of each of the

strikes thunder swiftly following. Rain was battering the window, pelting down to the earth in large globules of icy cold. Clinging precariously to the outside of the building and peering in through the partially curtained window, three red optics watched what was happening. When the hospital room door opened, Spinner ducked down, pulling a chunk of brick away with one of his metallic claws as he moved, almost losing his grip. He cast a quick look down. It was a ten storey fall, and the ex-Decepticon wasn't warm on the idea of testing to see what'd happen if he fell. An organic would surely die. A mech of his short stature and thin build would possibly end up badly damaged if he landed wrong. He adjusted his position and continued to watch the goings on inside the room. George was stood at the door, running a dark brown paw through his ruffled, greasy hair as the doctor was talking to the kids. Julie cracked open her eyes a couple of times, but otherwise lapsed back into a state of unconsciousness after a few seconds. Even with his powerful auditory receptors, Spinner was having a hard time understanding what they were saying. The window was a thick double glazing, the thunder was enough to give a deaf person a headache and the rain was clanging loudly and efficiently on his armour. A dribble of water slid down one of his protective optic lenses, blurring one side of his vision. He swore and shook his head, two thin pieces of alien metal sliding down across the lense like an organic would blink. When he opened his optic again, half his vision was still blurred.

And to sort the problem out, would mean to let go of his current precarious purchase on the side of the building. He decided that he'd put up with the interferred vision for a while longer and continued watching the foxes inside the room. George made an odd, helpless flailing gesture with his paws as he said something then walked out of the room, leaving his children with the doctor and his unconsciouse wife. Spinner snorted something and started the skittering descent down the side of the building. When he reached the second floor, he gave one last look around at his surroundings. Finding no one around to see him, he pushed away from the wall and landed with a wet *clack* on the pavement, the sound of the storm helping cover any noise he made. He looked around again and took off across the car park, darting between cars and shuffling about in the blind spots of the security cameras, optics constantly scanning his immediate surroundings and his radar system searching the rest of the car park. It was four AM, and all was relatively quiet. He spied the thick band of trees that lined one side of the hospital perimeter and ducked down, before taking off at a sprint across the car park, metallic feet clacking on the tarmac and concrete as he moved, weaving between cars and jumping effortlessly over them. When he reached the tall fence, he didn't slow. He just lept at it and clambered neatly over the top, paying no heed to the razor wire that lined its top. He knew where George was going. And he needed to get back to the house before that irritable organic did and realised that the washing machine wasn't there.

### Solstice

Flashpoint and Speeder stood over the open casing of one of the main engines. A flap had been pulled free to allow sufficient access to the innards of the powerful machine. Cables hung loose and an outer fuel line had been fractured, and was slowly dribbling the thick, bright purple fluid of Energon. Speeder turned around, long, thin spanner in one hand, and he peered into the innards of the second main engine. He made an odd, dismissive sound, that resembled more of a low buzz than anything else.

"And who's gonna be repairing these?" Speeder asked, not for the first time.

Flashpoint planted a hand on one hip and balanced most of his weight on one leg as he rolled a small, charred black cylinder between alloyed forefinger and thumb thoughtfully.

"A couple of old friends of mine." He said after a moment.

"Yeah... Chassis, Thunderbug and... Uh..." Speeder searched the haphazardness of his data banks

for that third designation. "Mainframe. Right...?"

Flashpoint nodded, with a hint of a smile.

"I see that clump on the head hasn't fried your memory too badly. Shame really..." Flashpoint sighed.

Speeder tilted his head slightly in questioning.

"Why...?" He asked slowly, not entirely sure if he really wanted to know.

"I was looking forward to practicing my processor surgery skills." The medical officer said and walked across the engine room.

"What?! I'd much rather you practiced those skills on someone else. I'm sure Falcon would be keen to help. Or even Raid."

Flashpoint snorted.

"Yeah! Right!" He laughed. "Raid is too stubborn and Blue Falcon is smarter than he looks."

"Are you vying for some kind of an ego boost? 'Cause if you are, you ain't gonna get it. At least, not from me. And not yet." Speeder folded his armoured arms across his chest.

Flashpoint chuckled and shook his head slowly.

"Hand me that length of ribbed piping, will you?" He said as he crouched down in the middle of the dimly lit engine room, pulling a panel from its place in the floor.

Speeder did as was told and handed the length of flexible black piping to the medic-cum-mechanic.

Flashpoint took it and pulled another, identical, yet heavily worn piece of piping from the square hole, swiftly replacing it with the fresh piece. He straightened and held up the old piece of pipe, blue optics flashing curiously in the near darkness as he inspected it. He then looked down at the new piece and nodded approvingly.

"That'll hold for another few stellar cycles." He said and tossed the worn length of piping at Speeder who deftly caught it in one hand. "As for the engines, well, they'll have to do as they are until we dock."

He rose from his kneeling position on the floor and replaced the panel.

"I certainly hope so. I dunno 'bout you, but I don't want to be breaking down. Not now we're only a few hours from Cybertron." Speeder said pointedly.

"Yeah. I can see Thunderbug having a wail of a time at our expense if that happens. So stay quiet and don't jinx us." Flashpoint replied and wandered over to a neatly stacked pile of old parts that was situated in a series of different sized metallic crates in the far corner of the room. He dumped the worn length of piping in a small box that was full to brim with frayed and holed pieces of cable and piping. The in-ship comm buzzed then Raid's voice sounded through the murk of the engine room.

"One hour until we dock." He announced then the line went dead again.

Speeder grinned broadly.

"Nearly home." He said enthusiastically.

"And it'll be good to be back, too. We've spent far too long away from Cybertron."

### Cybertron - Ankmor

Crash and Burnout watched as a lone vehicle rumbled down the rear ramp of the Epitaph. The vehicle was large, bulky and had a canvas styled covered buck. It was also very heavily loaded and the low, grating noise of alien music pounded from the Cybertronian cab. Following closely behind Roadtrain, Hookshot and Steele followed, their metallic caterpillar treads clacking and squeaking in unison across the hard metal ground as they disbanded from the ship in vehicle mode. Krusher was already sat out on the landing pad next to the large ship, loading doors open, awaiting to be loaded with what he could carry. Turbulance and Flare walked down the Epitaph's ramp, carrying as much as they could, loading

Krusher up as fast as they could. The sooner they got this task completed, the sooner they could go about their own business again. Burnout followed Crash closely as they walked across the landing pad, toward Krusher. Flare emerged from her temporary leader's hull and stopped dead in her tracks, Turbulance almost walking into her.

"Hey-!" He started then halted his protest when he saw why she'd stopped.

"Flare." Crash said, grinning broadly. "It's good to see you again. We were worried when you disappeared through that tear."

"I hope you're alright, little one." Burnout rumbled.

"I'm fine. I consider it a blessing of sorts that Krusher's crew was in the area. A twisted blessing, but one none-the-less." She added in a mutter. "Just got one last task to do before I can head back to base."

She said somewhat meekly when Krusher made a low rumbling noise.

Crash and Burnout cast a look at the Chinook styled Cybertronian craft.

"Ah, Krusher." Crash said, patting the deep green and black hull.

"Crash." Krusher rumbled in acknowledgement.

"It's good to see you back in one piece, too. My condolences on your losses."

"It's good to see you too, but I have no time to stand around chat. I must get the Space Bridge back to base and fully operational as soon as possible. Isn't that correct Turbulance?"

Turbulance looked around innocently, emerging from the shadows that the larger Decepticon cast.

"Last I heard, you were dead. Taken offline by the Autobot Speeder." Crash said as Turbulance stepped up beside Flare.

"A minor transmission error, I assure you. I'm in one piece and fully functioning as you can see." He replied, flexing his wings and arms with a small, marginally cruel smile. "I'm also looking to join a new unit."

"Are you indeed?" Burnout said, drawing himself up to his full height.

Crash looked up at him over his shoulder questioningly. Then he looked back at Turbulance.

"I can always make room for one more on my team." Crash said with a small, but polite smile.

Roadtrain made an odd noise that was just barely audible over his music.

"Jetstream say's it's all clear." He said. "Permission to head back to base, *sir?*"

"Permission granted. Let me know when you get there." Krusher replied.

They watched Roadtrain and his Constructicon escort rumble away at a steady speed.

"Your chief of transport, I take it?" Crash asked with a hint of amusement. "I take he doesn't much care for your company."

"He doesn't much care for anyone that can fly." Turbulance muttered.

"I get along okay with him." Flare piped up.

All optics focused on the young Decepticon very briefly. Flare seemed to shrink a few inches and went silent again.

"Are you requiring an escort?" Crash asked. "Burnout can add a little extra support to your air based escort, whilst I can help uh," He paused momentarily and searched his updated databanks. "Roadtrain, Steele and Hookshot."

"And why would I require additional help?" Krusher asked a touch peevishly.

"Surely you've heard that Optimus Prime's forces have taken back over seven leagues of land? From what we know, your base is now right on the cusp of Decepticon - Autobot territory. An escort of two with such a precious cargo would be tempting an enemy ambush." Burnout said pointedly.

Krusher muttered something unintelligible.

"Very well. I accept. But this is my run and my crew, so the orders I give are to be obeyed. Understand?"

He rumbled.

"Completely." Crash said with a semi mock bow. "Burnout, help our dear friends would you? I have to catch up to Roadtrain and his meager escort."

"As you order, sir." Burnout replied and crouched as his armoured plating shifted around his body, contorting himself into his alt mode, a form much akin to Krusher's own. "Ready for further orders, sir." He addressed Krusher.

Crash smiled and turned on an alloyed heel, taking a running jump into his own alt mode. His engine roared and he tore after the trine that had just left, heavily laden.

"Turbulance, Flare." Krusher ordered as he sealed himself up. "Transform and move out! We must arrive before sun-up."

As ordered, the two mechs lept neatly upwards and transformed at the top of their jumps, engines flaring with yellow and black flames. Krusher carefully took off after them, Burnout following behind, bringing up the formation's rear.

### 3 - Back To Base

#### Cybertron - Gygax

Raid followed Galaxy closely as she stepped off the Solstice. Flashpoint and Speeder were already on the landing pad, explaining the ship's situation and state to three other Autobots, who were stood, listening intently and nodding in agreement. Raid looked around at his surroundings, his damaged optics picking up nothing but white static and black, shapeless silhouettes.

"Has nowhere been left untouched by this war?" Galaxy muttered unhappily as she looked up at the charred and twisted remains of what was once a control tower.

The sun filtered through the battered city's buildings, giving extra light to the damage.

"War doesn't care what it takes." Raid said and urged Galaxy forward.

She looked down at him.

"Really think Flashpoint can fix your optics?" She asked hesitantly.

"I certainly hope so." He replied with a small smile.

As they approached the group, the on-going conversation became more audible.

"It'll take a few cycles to repair just one of the engines." Chassis was saying.

"Maybe even longer." Mainframe added. "With the story you've just spun us, there's no telling what the full extent of the damage is. It could, as you say, only be minor. But, until we take a closer look, we won't know for sure." She said with a dainty shrug that made her thin, silvery armour clang gently together.

"Basically, you're wanting to pull the engines apart..." Speeder hazarded, taking a few small sidesteps away from Flashpoint.

"Got it in one, big guy!" Said a thin, yellow and red Autobot.

Thunderbug was perched quite comfortably on Chassis's thick shoulder, a vantage point the Minicon had grown accustomed to.

"But, before you get your circuits in a twist about it, we gotta have a look at the damage first. Then we can give you a more accurate time." He continued.

Flashpoint shook his head slowly and gave an electronic sounding sigh.

"So long as the Solstice is able to operate at full capacity again..." He said.

"Take all the time you need." Raid said as Galaxy put a hand on his shoulder to halt him. "We're going to be here for quite some time. We still have a Space Bridge to retrieve." He added in a low rumble.

"Ah, yes.." Chassis said slowly. "We heard about that. Krusher seems like a slippery subject."

A metallic corner of Raid's mouth twitched in a slight smile.

"After this job's done, none of us will have to put up with Krusher ever again. I will personally see to it that he rusts at the bottom of a scrap heap somewhere far from here. That's a promise."

"And the worrying part is: You're good at keeping your promises." Chassis said.

"Well, we better get to work on this fine vessel of yours." Mainframe said, patting the lower strutt of the forward starboard landing foot.

"We'll keep in contact about what's happening." Thunderbug said as he slid down from Chassis's shoulder and made after the sleek fembot.

"Sir, permission to speak." It was more of a statement than a request.

Raid sighed and turned in Blue Falcon's general direction, his blue gaze three inches above the triple-changer's armoured head.

"You already know the answer to that one." Raid said bluntly.

"Uh, we've just got word that the Epitaph's crew has disbanded." Blue Falcon said.

"We need to hit Krusher hard while he's fully loaded and weighed down." Deadmetal added.

"Right now, we got more fire power than he does. He can't take care of himself when he's got a full load. Same with Roadtrain." Gundog put in.

"Chances are though, he'll have an escort. But you're right. This could possibly be the only chance we get to strike at him while he's virtually vulnerable." Raid then turned his attention to Galaxy. "Galaxy, I want you, Gundog and Deadmetal up there with him. He may or may not have Turbulance and Flare with him, so be careful." He then turned to Flashpoint. "Flashpoint, you'll be my optics. Solar, Speeder, Falcon, you'll accompany me also. We need to stop Roadtrain and his escorts from getting back to base. We'll also be providing cover for Galaxy and her team from the ground if required. Keep in contact at all times, understood?"

There was a chorus of affirmatives and the small unit divided themselves into the designated teams. As ordered, Gundog and Deadmetal went with Galaxy, transforming as they left into the air behind her. Raid followed Flashpoint from the landing pad flanked by Speeder and Blue Falcon, Solar flying low and keeping pace above them.

*"I've located Krusher's convoy." Galaxy transmitted after a while. "They're one league west of the northern Ankmor Autobot - Decepticon border and they're moving fast. At full speed, I can intercept them as they reach a half league from their base."*

There was a moment's pause. Raid was moving as fast as he could and already Galaxy was way ahead of him.

*"Where's Deadmetal and Gundog?"* He asked curiously.

*"Keeping pace. Some how..."* She replied.

Another silent pause. Then he mentally shook himself. They were probably gaining extra speed from the larger Autobot's slipstream.

*"Proceed with intercept. And be careful."* He transmitted.

*"I'm always careful."* Then Galaxy cut the line off with a split second of static before the comm-line went silent.

### Cybertron - Ankmor

The convoy of three, one standard Cybertronian transporter and two Constructicons, rumbled carefully down the battle scarred main road. There was no one else in sight, not even detectable by radar. The two Constructicons, Hookshot and Steele, were talking amongst themselves, trailing after the heavily loaded Roadtrain.

"Y'know that weird feeling I get in my circuits just before something bad's about to happen...?" Steele said as he maneuvered around a felled pylon that had been blown across the road.

"Not really, but go on." Hookshot replied.

"Well, I'm getting that feeling right now..." Steele said slowly.

"If we're gonna get set upon by some derranged Autobots, then we'd have picked them up on our scanning systems. Now, I dunno 'bout you, but I the only thing I can see is road, road and more slugging road!" Roadtrain growled. "Oh, and alot of wreckages, too." He added, a little more calmly.

Silence then claimed all three and they travelled further without another word, the sounds comming from their engines and treads as they made their way across the twisted and scarred metallic surface of Cybertron. It didn't take too long for Hookshot to break the silence.

"What's that...?" He mused almost to himself.

In the distance, there was the slight sound of large, metal caterpillars grating across the road surface, crushing everything that got in its owners way.

"Nuts." Roadtrain hissed as a familiar ID appeared on his radar. "Autobots."

"Four of them." Hookshot corrected.

"What did I say? What did I say about that weird feeling I get?" Steele said hastily.

All three sped up, moving as fast as they dared on the littered roadway. Roadtrain's load shifted from side to side as he moved.

"I'm not in the mood for a fight!" He snarled unhappily.

"We may have to fight." Hookshot said.

"Yeah, if we lose this load, especially without putting up a fight, Krusher's gonna be more than slagged off." Steele added earnestly.

The four Autobots were gaining on them faster than they had anticipated.

"Oh dear Primus *no!* It's Raid. And he's brought some friends." Steele whined.

"We have to stand and fight! I'd, personally rather face off against Raid than Krusher." Hookshot said.

"Carry on Roadtrain, we'll try and slow them down."

Roadtrain needed no encouraging. As the Constructicons had started to slow, he had already sped up. Both Constructicons applied their brakes, their treads stopping dead, sending up sparks as they slid to a halt in the metallic, debris littered road. Both started their transformation sequences, standing upright, taking a defensive stance.

"Oh no..." Steele muttered. "Roadtrain's screwed..."

Solar streaked past, a blur of yellows, oranges and reds soaring over their heads. The sound of laser fire immediately rang out behind them and they heard Roadtrain's string of curses as his load clattered to the ground. Hookshot hazarded a quick look over his shoulder. Roadtrain had been upturned, wheels spinning with an angry whirring, the Space Bridge parts hanging from his buck, whilst some of the smaller pieces had escaped onto the road. Solar was circling above him, waiting for the transporter's next move. Then Flashpoint lept from vehicle mode and slammed into Hookshot, tackling him to the ground, sending up white hot sparks around them both. Speeder and Blue Falcon descended on Steele; Speeder driving hard into his legs, removing his feet from beneath him, and Blue Falcon following Flashpoint's display of a flying tackle. All three landed hard. Raid made his way up Hookshot as he fought to free himself of the Autobot medic. Both cannon muzzles leveled on the Constructicon. There was a slight whistling sound as he charged two shots. Hookshot froze, arm braced against Flashpoint's neck, holding him back. Even Steele had stopped dead when the large tank had approached.

"We can do this easy way, or the hard way." Raid rumbled. "Surrender your half of the Space Bridge, or I blow you all to pieces."

"What?!" Hookshot yelped as Flashpoint moved hastily out of the way.

The Constructicon stayed glued to the spot, sprawled out on the ground, red optics wide as he stared into the glowing end of one wide gun barrel. He dimly heard Roadtrain growl something, but the words refused to compute with his mind.

"I *said*, we can make a deal." Roadtrain said a little more loudly, gaining everyone's attention.

He was still lay on his side in vehicle mode with half of his load spilled in the road.

"A deal with a Decepticon?" Solar snorted dismissively as he transformed and landed warily next to Roadtrain.

"Yeah. Exactly. We'll make you a deal." Roadtrain said more firmly this time.

Raid hesitated.

"What kind of deal...?" He enquired slowly, keeping his cannons trained on Hookshot.

"You rough us up a little to make it look like we put up a fight, and you get the parts." He replied.

"What?!" This time it came from Steele.

"So, what you're saying, is that we get the Bridge parts you're transporting in exchange for beating you up?" Blue Falcon asked slowly, not sure if what he'd heard was right. "I'm sure I got dust in my audio receptors..."

"No, that's exactly what I mean. That way, we all win. Sort of. You get half of what you want, and we only get a minor beating from Krusher, instead of the slow, agonizing death he promised us if we failed miserably."

Speeder and Blue Falcon looked at the smaller Constructicon, a wicked flicker briefly playing behind their lenses.

"You've got a strange sense of logic, Roadtrain." Raid said with a mildly amused tone. "But, either way, I'm going to take you up on your *deal*."

Hookshot groaned and Steele whimpered.

"I'm gonna beat the bolts out of you myself if we survive this one, Roady." Hookshot growled angrily as Flashpoint's balled fist came down on him.

Jetstream stood in the command room of the small base. Some of the security locks had been hacked and some minor equipment and half the Energon cache had been pilfered by the Autobots and some Neutrals, but other than that, everything was still in working order. Though she might not be once Krusher arrives and sees for himself what had been taken during his absence. And that moment would be happening some time soon. She continued pacing back and forth, walking to one side of the dark room, and back to the other, hands at her back, head dipped low as if deep in thought. She hoped that he'd hurry up and arrive sooner rather than later. She had to personally report back to Decepticon headquarters at the end of the day, and the sun was fast setting once more, casting this side of the planet in darkness. It was something Megatron had personally ordered of all those who did scout work and intelligence work. It was time consuming, yes. But it helped weedle out the majority of the spies. She stopped her pacing at the sounds of activity outside. She approached a small monitor that was tucked away in the darkest corner of the room and switched in on. The flat screen crackled momentarily then gave a view of the main courtyard. Krusher had landed and was now being unloaded. She recognised Flare and Turbulance, but the one who bore an uncanny resemblance to Krusher, she didn't recognise. She turned away from the screen and walked out of the large room and proceeded to navigate the maze of corridors until she was outside.

"Need a hand?" She asked as she approached them.

"Heard anything from Roadtrain?" Krusher asked, blatantly ignoring her question.

Jetstream shook her head.

"No. I lost contact a little while ago. I was hoping either of you had heard from them." She replied with a hint of concern.

She then looked the unfamiliar Decepticon over as he placed a large metallic crate down atop another of similar size.

"I don't believe we've met." She prompted.

"I'm Burnout. I work under the command of Crash." He said bluntly and retrieved another crate from Krusher's cargo hold.

"It was him and Crash who rescued me." Flare said, her voice just loud enough for only Jetstream to hear.

As Turbulance brought out the final length of pipe, Krusher rose to his feet, seemingly glaring down at Jetstream as his armour shifted and folded around his bipedal form.

"Try and contact him, then." He growled. Then he turned around and fixed his glare on Turbulance.

"Give me the Teleport Modulator *now!*" He ordered.

Turbulance returned the glare and produced the small device, cracking open one of the smaller crates and depositing it within.

"There. Now can I leave?" He muttered.

As an answer, Krusher ignored him and turned his attentions to Flare and Burnout. Turbulance grumbled and took off, transforming back into jet mode and disappearing into the gathering clouds.

"Have you heard from Crash?" Krusher asked.

Burnout shook his head.

"EMP interference. I can't get a signal through to him." Burnout replied.

Jetstream had hurried back inside to try and contact the other convoy, but to no avail. Each time she opened a line to either Roadtrain, Hookshot or Steele, she was greeted by nothing but fractured static. She grumbled impatiently. She wanted to get her report over and done with as soon as possible. It was never something she looked forward to. Soundwave gave her the creeps...

Krusher, Burnout and Flare joined her. Soon, every monitor in the room was alight, pale blues flooding the chamber, giving it light. There was a moment of silence, then a familiar voice crackled through the speakers in the main console.

"Hoo... base, request..... Badly damaged..... Sen... Coordin...." The voice was fractured and perforated with buzzing and crackling static.

"That's Hookshot." Flare stated bluntly.

Jetstream stared intently at the information that was being pumped onto her small monitor, that her gaze almost became a glare.

"I have their coordinates. There's Autobot activity in the area." She said as she deciphered the fractured transmission.

"Raid, Flashpoint, Speeder.... Uh... I can't make out the other. There's too much static." Flare said and continued to fiddle with the instrumentation at her chosen station.

"Blue Falcon." Krusher finished for her after a moment.

"Any word of Crash?" Burnout asked.

"None." Jetstream replied. "I'll keep trying to contact him." She said, all thoughts of her report fleeing her mind.

"Flare, you'll be comming with me and Burnout. We'll go see why they need a lift." Krusher grumbled. The smaller Decepticon hesitated then hurried to follow Burnout as he walked with Krusher from the chamber. Once outside, they made a hasty transformation and took off in search for their comrades.

## 4 - Pilfered

### Ankmoor

Flare circled over head in a wide orbit as ordered. Krusher and Burnout had landed among the wreckage that consisted of Hookshot, Steele and Roadtrain. Burnout scanned the area, making full use of all his scanning equipment, searching for any signs of Crash. Krusher's crew were of no interest to him, so he largely ignored them as they lay battered and twisted on the metallic ground. He eventually crouched down beside Hookshot and gave an experimental prod to a piece of exposed circuitry, causing the semi-offline Constructicon's limb to twitch and spark. His optics flickered red, then flared to dull life. "Constructicon." Burnout rumbled impatiently. "Where is the Decepticon designated Crash." Hookshot remained silent, processor reeling painfully. Flashpoint wasn't as flimsy as he made himself out to be...

When Burnout gave another, more solid poke to the same spot, Hookshot let out a low, moaning electronic squeel, tilting his head to one side as pain registered in his damaged arm.

"Dunno 'bout no Crash..." He muttered, his voice tinny and distant.

Burnout rose steadily to his feet, keeping his angry red optics on the felled Crane.

"You are useless, Constructicon." He growled. "Crash assigned himself to your convoy-"

"And he didn't show up." Krusher butted in.

Burnout turned to look at his fellow Decepticon as he loomed over the unmoving body of Roadtrain, who was still in vehicle mode.

"He must've been ambushed on his way to meet them." He continued.

Burnout made an odd, dismissive noise.

"Then these Autobots of yours must be as cunning as you said. Crash isn't one to be easily overcome."

Burnout rumbled.

Overhead, Flare banked sharply and darted off into the distance. A few moments later, she came back. "I've found Crash! He's just west of here, and looks to be damaged!" She called to them before darting away again.

"You take care of your unit and I'll take care of mine." Burnout said, halting Krusher's next movements.

"Until we meet again..." He smiled pleasantly and took off after Flare.

Krusher watched them go. He was now on his own, with three downed Decepticons that needed to be shifted back to base. He looked down at Roadtrain as the transporter started to laborously unfurl his armour to lay sprawled and defeated on his back.

"You lost the SPACE BRIDGE!!" Krusher howled, administering a swift, solid kick to Roadtrain's dented side.

"Not... M'fault..." Roadtrain muttered, his voice being disrupted by static. "Ambushzzzzzzzz..."

The old mech twitched then lay still, red optics staring skyward.

From somewhere behind, came the sound of metal grating against metal, and the laboured sounds of mechanical limbs trying to move properly and fluidly. Krusher cast a disdainful look over an armoured shoulder and at the scarred and dented form of Steele, who was desperately trying to rise to his feet.

The Constructicon managed to make it as far as kneeling before less-than-gracefully collapsing again.

Krusher grumbled and shook his head.

"*Jetstream!*" He transmitted angrily.

There was a moment's pause. Then:

"Sir?" Was the careful reply.

"I'll be needing some help with getting these three back to base. They're badly damaged and can't move under their own power."

"I'm on my way." Jetstream said before cutting the line of communications off.

Krusher gave one last kick to Roadtrain and walked toward where the more online form of Steele sat, rubbing at his head.

"Some experienced chief of transport you turned out to be." He growled as he walked away.

Roadtrain groaned in reply.

### Nymex 3 - Furman Household

Sat at the crowded kitchen table, Poppy and Lee sat, prodding at their food. Neither Fox looked happy, their daily expressions and postures suggesting depression and lack of sleep. It had been yesterday morning that they'd got the phone call. Their mother had gone into a coma, her head injuries more severe than the doctors had first anticipated. It was a Saturday, their father was at work and they had the company of their aunt Mavis whilst their grandparents were at the hospital. Mavis shuffled into the kitchen, a basket full of laundry in her thick arms, large, orange tail swaying busily behind her as she moved. All had been occupying their minds in any manner they could find. The basket was dumped on the tattered linoleum floor before the washing machine. The greying vixen crouched stiffly before the squat, ugly machine and pulled the door open, eliciting a wet creek from the rusting hinge. She experimentally wiggled the door a few more times, gaining the same noise with each movement. She tutted and bundled the dirty laundry into the large drum before closing the door and administering the powder and liquid softener to the draw, which was half full with water and had sticky clumps of the cheap washing powder stuck in the corners.

"This poor thing's overworked." She muttered. "Hasn't your mother considered getting a new one?" She asked when the machine laborously started to move with a low groan and a wet gurgle.

"Too poor." Lee muttered.

"It's the only one we've had that's outlived its warranty. Never needed to call the repairman out, either."

Poppy added in a detached tone as she prodded at her cold pile of mash.

"That and dad keeps drinking his wages, so we can't afford anything new." Lee added sourly, hunching over his half eaten dinner.

Mavis planted her paws on her hips, lips twisted in a disapproving pout.

"Your father needs something else to think about, other than booze." She grunted. "How much longer is he going to be out?"

The twins looked at her, tired eyes suddenly alert.

"You know he's the one who put mum in the hospital, right?" Lee said pointedly.

"Oh, I know. I've known what he's like since the day she met him. And it's about time someone turned the tables on him, don't you?" She said gruffly and marched into the living room. "I shall stay up for as long as it takes for him to crawl back home."

She then sat down on the sofa and picked up her knitting project and started clicking away with purpose.

Come midnight, the children were still awake, sat downstairs in the small living room with their aunt. Poppy was reading a book and Lee was playing video games on his handheld console. Mavis was still industriously knitting away, a half formed stripey scarf reaching down past her thick knees and almost

touching the shoddily carpeted floor. Poppy yawned widely, half heartedly shielding her mouth with the back of a brown paw. The front door clicked open. A moment later, George appeared, black tie hanging loosely around his neck and white shirt partially untucked. Mavis rose from her seat on the sofa, depositing her knitting down in its small carry basket. George gave her a sozzled look, one ear up, the other tilted. In the kitchen, the washing machine slowed to an inconspicuous halt, water draining prematurely as it forgot about its fourth load of the day. All eyes - and a set of hidden optics - were on George and Mavis.

"What yoo doin' up sho layte?" He asked slowly, eyeing up the three foxes who stared at him.

Mavis smiled as politely as she could.

"We wanted to see you off." She said sweetly.

"Whut?" George asked mildly miffed as he swayed on the spot, reaching a paw out to grab ahold of the banister on the stairs to steady himself.

"You're leaving. *Tonight.*" Mavis continued, more firmly. "Your bags are packed and I've payed for a room at the Moto-Motel for a couple of nights."

George's brow furrowed and he swivelled awkwardly on the spot, eyeing up the two duffel bags and the single suitcase that were stacked neatly behind the front door.

"Oh! Sho, yoo shtill fink dat ah'mma... Ah'mma... Wife beater, ryte...?" He then laughed drunkenly. "Dun be sho fracken' stoopid, ya old hag!"

There was a solid *crack* as Mavis slapped George across the face with all the force she could muster, sending him sprawling to the floor. He pulled himself into an awkward sitting position once the dark spots had cleared from his vision and rubbed at the side of his face, tongue licking across the inside of his cheek.

"One: I don't think. I *know* you give my sister a good hiding everyday. And *two*, if you dare insult me or raise a finger to these kids or Julie ever again, I will have your hide, *understand?*!" She growled angrily as she encroached on him to loom over him.

George looked up at her, wide eyed, and suddenly feeling a touch sober.

"Didchoo jus'...?" He mused as he rubbed his cheek. "I din't fink you 'ad it in yer..." He smiled. It wasn't a particularly pleasant smile either.

"Remove yourself from this house or I will have you removed by *force.*" She said brusquely.

"Or we'll set the washing machine on you." Poppy giggled from behind her book.

George's eyes narrowed on his daughter and he pulled himself upright. He took a step toward her and there was an odd gurgle and grinding noise in the kitchen. George stopped dead and cast a look into the kitchen. The offending appliance was just visible above the table top, the long table cloth hiding the rest of it from his view. The machine twitched and a small, red light on the control panel flickered.

*I'll have your hide...* He thought numbly. *I'll strip the flesh from your bones...*

George shuddered. He didn't know who he wanted to take his chances with. The police, Mavis or the washing machine that he'd somehow once managed to persuade himself was just an illusion. He muttered something unintelligible, turned and grabbed his bags before hauling them awkwardly out of the front door. There was a moment's silence until the sound of tiny plastic wheels rattling across the pavement had vanished into the distance. Lee looked at his aunt, who still stood in place, before the front door.

"Why didn't you use that brass ornament to brain him?" He asked bluntly.

"Because it doesn't have the same satisfying sound as actually *hitting* him, deary. And anyway, it's only fitting we make his life in this town as miserable as possible." She said blankly.

*Completely agreed, Aunt Mavis...* Spinner sneered to himself.

"Right then. Off to bed you two. We're going to the hospital in a couple of hours." She said and ushered

them off upstairs whilst she locked the house up.

Lights were clicked off and the house went dark and silent. Under the sideboard in the kitchen, the washing machine went about its daily routine. Two spindly feet emerged from two holes at the back of the machine and it pushed itself forward from its cubbyhole, water pipes and the power cable detaching from the wall and taps. Panels shifted and folded in upon themselves like a form of mechanical origami and the new form stood in the kitchen and stretched all limbs, each joint squeaking in protest of lack of movement. Dirty water dribbled from his chest cavity and Spinner pulled a long, stripey sock out from between his chest plating. Red optics focused on the piece of sopping wet, brightly coloured material before discarding it with disinterest. The sock landed against the opposite wall with a wet *slap* and slid down into the cat's basket.

"Moto-Motel..." Spinner mused quietly as he scanned the kitchen. "Where have I seen that before...?" He silently made his way across to the living room and started to rummage through a stack of papers and books that had been deposited on the small table the phone occupied. After a moment of careful searching, he pulled a thick, yellow book from the pile and swiftly searched the flimsy paper pages of sickly yellow with nimble talon-like fingers. He slapped a hand down on a page about halfway through his browsing with an affirmative grunt. In the center of the page, was the advert for the Moto-Motel, containing the phone number and adress. The establishment was on the outskirts of Bresham, to the west. It was a main road and George was drunk. Accidents, even in the early stages of morning, could happen. Spinner slapped the book shut and slid it back into place, rearranging all the papers and phone books, placing them back in their previous positions. He checked the time. Then he crept toward the front door, rubbing his spindly claws together, a low, squeaking electric chuckle filtering out into the darkness. He cast a quick look up the stairs and listened. No movement. Just the snores that accompanied the dark hours of every day. Spinner proceeded to pry open the door, the simple lock clicking open under his precise fiddlings. He silently cracked the door open and slid out into the crisp, spring night.

Looking up and down the street, he plotted the most likely course that the organic would take. Lowering himself to the ground, bracing himself with his hands, Spinner inspected the slight trails in the thin frost that covered the ground. Powerful specialized optics homed in on the ice. There was, indeed, a fresh trail. Sticking to all-fours, the Decepticon followed the trail, alloyed face just inches from the cold ground, his other senses reaching outward, searching for any signs of life that may disturb him from his tracking. Halfway down the road, something in the back of his mind bleeped meekly. A small symbol slowly materialized in the bottom right of his vision. Spinner faltered in his movements. *A message?* He thought and hurriedly continued with his current task. *No one's made contact with me since... No... No, no, no! Carjack's offline. Permanently.* He insisted to himself. But someone had sent him a message. As he continued inspecting George's trail, he took a hesitant look at the message.

**If you wish to be reinstated into the Decepticon ranks without repurcussions for your previous crimes, then I suggest you find your way back to Cybertron while the boss is still in a good mood.**

**Reply to this message if you intend on taking this generous offer up.**

**- Turbulance**

Spinner stopped in his tracks. He bounded off the pavement and skittered into the shadows of an alley opposite. Had he really just read that? He re-read the message numerous times. He inspected it's validity several times. It was definately from a Decepticon called Turbulance. The name rang a bell, but he couldn't place it. The message was five days old, but genuine. Spinner crouched, sitting on his metallic heels, a finger tapping thoughtfully at his chin. After several moments of hard thinking, he

composed his first message in decades.

**Offer accepted. I'll locate Carjack's remains and utilize his personal Space Bridge. I'll transmit once I'm back on Cybertron.**

**- Spinner**

He sent the message and clacked his fingers together nervously. His Spark fizzed in his chest with an unexpected flux of anxiety. It could still be a trap to lure back all the renegades and run-aways to re-programme them. Or even to dispose of them.... *Oh slag, I hope this isn't a trick...* He thought nervously.

It'd been too long since he'd seen his home planet. And the run-in with Carjack had only ignited his need to be surrounded by his fellow mechs once more, be they enemy or not. It was something he desired. He had caught himself growing too fond of the organics, and he'd decided that it needed to be changed; that his feelings towards the slow creatures must be altered at all costs. He was a Decepticon, not an Autobot, and he intended on keeping it that way. After a moment, he shook his head and set about tracking George once more, in a hope that he might be able to catch up to him before he reached the motel. It had also dawned on Spinner, the closer he got, that the infernal Fox's place of work was close to the Moto-Motel. And, after a quick inspection of the laboratories and their grounds after the incident in town some years ago, he'd learned that they were keeping Carjack's fractured remains there, piecing his damaged body back together like some kind of giant jigsaw puzzle.

It would indeed be a full night. Spinner proceeded to pick up the pace, rounding another corner and crossing the road. When he looked up again, he could see the motel sat hunched and faceless on a dark corner beneath the overhead by-pass. A single sign was lit up above the carpark entrance, Moto-Motel written in sparking, illuminated blue lettering pointing out the ugly building.

*Nice choice Mavis.* Spinner thought and skittered across to the overgrown shrubbery that lined one side of the carpark, his metallic feet clicking and clacking against the splitting tarmac and pavement. He dived into the cover of the haggard bushes and circled around the side of the building carefully, optics searching. There was a click, and a sour, familiar grumble. George was fiddling around with a key, trying to force it upside-down into the scarred lock of a door. After a moment's swearing, he finally managed to open the door and he staggered into the darkness beyond, trailing his bags with him. The light flicked on, the door slammed shut then after a few seconds, the light went out again. A quiet hissing emanated from Spinner's vocal processor. He looked around and sprinted across the half empty carpark, toward the room that George occupied. He peered through the window, just barely able to see the dark room beyond the drawn curtains through a slit in the ageing material. The Fox had passed out on the sofa, his luggage discarded by the shoddily constructed dinner table. Spinner sidled across to the door, had another look at his surroundings and proceeded to carefully pick the lock. The door clicked. Spinner carefully prodded it open and stepped inside, locking the door behind him.

## 5 - Feeling Stealthy

### Gygax

"I don't believe it. None of it." Gundog said as he helped Deadmetal hold one of the large metal pipes upright.

"I can." Deadmetal replied.

"It's not like a Decepticon to just roll over and take a beating." Gundog continued with a dismissive shake of his head. "I mean, *why*?! They could've at least put a fight!"

"You obviously haven't had much contact with Krusher, have you?" Flashpoint asked as he welded the pipe into place.

"Hardly heard of the bot until we scrounged a lift with you guys." Gundog admitted.

"Okay, you can let go now." The medic said.

Deadmetal and Gundog carefully relinquished their grip on the pipe and took a hasty step back in case Flashpoint's welds didn't hold. The steadily growing structure creaked then settled.

"They fear Krusher more than they fear us." Flashpoint said. "That's why it was so easy to take the Space Bridge parts they were transporting."

"More scared of him than us?" Gundog muttered. "We'll have to see about changing that."

The three of them looked up at the base structure of the Space Bridge. The basin had been fastened back together and the two main support pylons had been erected. Several of the computers that helped run it were in place and ready to be fused with the rest of the structure.

"Now all we gotta do is retrieve the other half of the Bridge." Deadmetal said.

"Any ideas on how we're gonna do that?" Gundog asked.

"I'm hoping we'll kick them while they're down." Flashpoint replied. "With three members of his crew down, Krusher's a relatively easy target."

"Uh, with Raid still unable to see, we're also at a major disadvantage in the fact that we have a blind leader who's vehicle mode is a dirty great tank! Now, I dunno 'bout you, but I ain't keen on the idea of being in the same area as him during a fire fight..." Gundog said bluntly.

"I'm hoping to remedy that very soon. I'm waiting for Speeder and Blue Falcon to get back from the protoform hospital with his new set of optical sensors. I just hope they make it back in one piece."

"And once you get his new optics working, we can invade their base?" Gundog asked hopefully.

"Depends how quick I can do it and what Raid's thoughts are on the idea." Flashpoint admitted. "And also on how cooperative he's feeling..." He added in a mutter.

"We best go find out, then, right?" Gundog said and walked from the Space Bridge chamber.

"And here's me thinking he wouldn't fit in anytime soon..." Flashpoint mused and followed, Deadmetal trailing behind.

### Nymex 3 - Moto-Motel

Three red lights pierced the darkness of the shabby motel room, focusing on the lone, bedraggled figure that lay sprawled on the single bed, snoring loudly. Spinner continued to watch for a few moments longer, debating on what he should do next. Waking the sleeping organic right now would be somewhat

amusing. So would tormenting him for a short time. It would keep the Decepticon amused whilst he searched Carjack's body which had been secreted away in the bowels of the faceless building that George worked within. Eventually, his optics fell upon the Fox's luggage. Spinner crept toward them and carefully unzipped one. He rummaged silently. Nothing. Nothing but clothes. George grunted and rolled over, almost falling out of bed. Spinner froze mid-way zip-up. When the organic didn't awaken, Spinner proceeded to un-zip the second bag. Inside was a washbag and a leather wallet. Long, nimble fingers that were forged on a distant planet pried the pouch open and flipped through what was inside. He pulled an ID card out and flipped it over in his sharp fingers. There was a small photo of George laminated to the paper's top right corner. Covering the rest of the pale blue paper was his details. Spinner flipped the card over again and inspected the black strip that ran across its bottom. The Decepticon cast a look at the slumbering George and sneered quietly. He had an idea. Spinner turned neatly on the ball of his foot and made his way back outside, locking the door quietly behind him. Sunrise was still a few hours away, and the laboratories were lurking just beyond the thick treeline across the wide, neglected road.

Spinner scuttled through the shadows, his movements making the barest of noises against the tarmac. He halted at a corner of a squat, brown bricked building and eyed up the security light. At the other end of the yard, there was a short, white Bull Terrier in a guard's uniform seemingly aimlessly wandering around and looking utterly bored. A small weapon was brought to bear, Spinner's fingers rearranging into the tiny, but lethal gun. He lifted his arm and took aim. A small *pop* and the sensor on the security light was shattered. The pieces of plastic and bare wiring glittered beneath the moonlight and stars as they lay spread about on the black ground. The guard looked over his shoulder, pale eyes scanning the area behind him, paw on holstered revolver. He squinted into the dark, then, with a soft grunt, he carried on with his patrol. Spinner kept his weapon to hand and scuttled up against the opposite building, sidling silently toward an emergency exit door. He stepped onto the concrete step, looked around again and exchanged his gun for a thin blade. He turned around, slipping the blade into the narrow gap between door and frame, and started harrassing the lock. As he looked to his left, there was a click. Not the click that would accompany the unlocking of a door. But the click that accompanied the cocking of a small weapon. Spinner slowly withdrew his blade and tilted his head to one side, red optics rotating to look upon the startled Bull Terrier. His eyes were wide, his stance defensive and his revolver trained nervously on the Decepticon. Spinner stepped from the door, going into a crouching stance as if ready to pounce, a low, electronic hiss emanating from a hidden mouth. The guard took a step back, bracing his gun in both paws, eyes fixed upon the mechanical creature that was slowly creeping toward him, head jutting out toward him on the end of a long, flexible neck. The guard took another step back and collided with a chainlink fence. He let out a soft whimper. A paw tentavely reached toward the radio attached to his belt. Spinner lept forward, two blades at the ready. The guard shrieked in dismay as he bore down on him, alien silver grinting sharply under the security lights and the moon. The guard's screams were quickly cut off, lowering into a mumbling gurlge as Spinner sliced through his neck, spilling his blood on the ground. The guard didn't even get a chance to use his gun. Spinner wiped his blades on the guard's shirt and got back to work on the door.

When the door finally clicked open, Spinner stuck his head inside. The hallway beyond was dark with a single striplight at the end, illuminating another door. He slipped silently in, letting the door close behind him. He moved carefully down the hallway and pried the other door open. Beyond was the main lobby. Leading off from that area were two wide, finely decorated hallways. Spinner took a thorough look at his surroundings, scrutinizing everything with all his senses. There were several security cameras, but he

found their blind spots easily. Each one moved, surveying a specific area. Spinner moved into the blind spot of one and followed it around as it swept its designated area, searching for any signs of intruders. He sprinted into the blind spot of the next camera until he was in the hallway. He pressed himself against the floor and scuttled beneath the chairs and tables that were lined neatly against the walls. When he came to the end, he pulled George's ID from a small cavity within his armour plating and swiped it through the card reader on the door frame. The small machine beeped informatively and the doors swung open, inviting the small Decepticon in. Beyond, the lights were harsh and bright and everything was stainless steel and sterile white. It was an easy place for him to blend in. He proceeded carefully into the depths of the labs, all senses on high alert, listening and searching for any signs of life that were coming in his direction. Spinner skittered around another corner, hiding in the blind spot of another security camera. He then scurried across the white linoleum to the opposite end of the corridor and braced himself beneath a chaotic looking stainless steel trolley as a short, female Terrier walked past, clipboard in paw. Spinner sighed lightly. Why did some organics insist on working during the night and the stupid hours of the morning? It still made no sense to him, especially since they needed constant re-fuelling. *Such awkward creatures. It's a wonder they survived at all.* He thought bitterly. He stuck his head out into the open and looked around. From beyond the double doors to his right, the sound of voices came. Spinner tuned in on the voices and stuck to his cramped hiding place.

"We're still searching for the other parts." Said a soft female voice.

There was grunt of acknowledgement.

"Yes, that's understandable. It was one hell of a mess, but we *need* those final parts. This, *thing*, whatever it was, appears to be purely mechanical. If we can somehow figure out a way to put it back together and possibly even reactivate it, we could learn so much more!" Said the other voice. "Like, where it came from, who created it, what its purpose was..."

There was a wistful sigh. Then the woman cleared her throat in a polite manner.

"But we still need to locate those final parts before we can even consider trying to stick it back together, let alone reactivate it." She said. "And the workings of it is so complicated... There's so many pieces to it..." She trailed off. There was a moment's silence in the hyper active conversation. "I've seen a piece of its brain. Or, processor, rather. Whatever you wanna call it. It's the most complicated thing I've ever seen. More complicated even, than an organic brain. There's a strange, almost see-through outer casing surrounding it. We think that this outer casing may have been in a liquified state before it uh, blew up."

"What caused its neck to explode anyway?" The male queried interestedly.

"Not sure at the moment. The news reports at the time show three more, much smaller mechanical creatures attacking it. One of which made a direct attack on the news chopper. We're not sure if they were the direct cause of the explosion, or if they merely triggered it by over-angering the beast. But from the footage, we do know that they can change shape. That strange looking military chopper that kept going after the news crew? It changed its shape. When the news crew went down, the cameras were still recording. That police car also changed its shape. As did that black jet. Everything was caught on tape."

"Shapeshifting machines...." He mused slowly. "You think they're sentient?" The male asked after a moment.

There was a brief pause.

"From the way they were maneuvering on the tapes, yes. It's a high possibility. But, whether that sentience comes through some kind of pilot or whether it's self motivated, I don't know. Our best chance is to try and get our specimen back online."

Spinner continued to listen to the conversation as it moved away. He slowly and carefully peeled himself

from beneath the metal trolley and kept his distance as he followed the two scientists. They kept discussing what he'd figured to be Carjack's remains. He continued to listen to them babble and speculate over the massive Decepticon's origins and his basic motor functions.

"And the markings on it's armour?" The woman asked. "Definitely unlike anything I've ever seen."

"Same. After months of studying them, the conclusion I came to was alien. Nothing in any historical records I've looked at and studied have mentioned anything about markings like that."

"So it's definitely alien. Something we both agree on."

"Mmm-hmm. If we can figure out a way to create something of our own from this creature's body, maybe even it's own components, and incorporate it into a machine of our own, saay.... A space shuttle, maybe we can find the world it came from? We could explore beyond our own solar system!" The woman laughed heartily.

"Ooohhh.... S-sorry." She chuckled, obviously having gained herself a sour look. "That's the funniest thing I've heard all week."

"But incorporating this alien technology into our own is a feasible idea, you must agree." He said bluntly.

"Mmmm, yes. We've discovered a few components in its body that represent something akin to a basic computer's components."

Spinner shook his head slowly. Although he admired their ambition, he still thought they were a ridiculous race. The two scientists then vanished through a door. Spinner flattened himself against the wall then took a peek through the long window he was crouched beneath. Inside, a set of heavy white curtains sealed off one side of the room. The room itself was big. *Massive* in fact. The ceiling was tall and there was very few features. Just four, solid walls, a ceiling, a floor and a couple of doors, all of which were painted in hues of white and grey. Spinner clicked a fingertip against his alloyed chin. How far had he come into the labs? He had descended a flight of stairs. Several, actually. He must be in a basement level, because he had a strong idea of who was lay just out of sight, beyond that curtain.

Upon that realisation, he decided he needed a plan. A diversion. Something to relocate the organic's attentions and remove them from the room for several minutes. Several minutes is all he'd need. He knew where the Space Bridge node would be located on Carjack's body, as warped as it had become. He looked around himself. His immediate surroundings were bare and pale. Then a small red box on the wall a little further down the corridor caught his attention. He sprinted across to it and inspected it. A fire alarm. *Perfect*. He thought. He touched the thin glass with the tip of a sharp finger. He continued pushing against the glass with his finger tip. The thin glass splintered and small cracks crawled out from where his finger was boring into the material, forming a strange spider web pattern. The button on the other side of the glass was depressed. Alarms shrieked and a single red light in the corner above the far door flashed. Spinner removed his finger quickly. The doors to his target room swung open and four organics, all dressed in long white coats, white shirts and black trousers hurried out and headed down the hall. None paid any heed to the lone Decepticon stood out in the open. Spinner seized the moment and darted into the room. He cautiously made his way over to the heavy curtains. He had one last look at his surroundings, just to make sure no one had risked staying put before lifting the bottom of the curtains up and ducking beneath them. On the other side, he was greeted by a grim sight. The warped body of Carjack lay on a set of massive white sheets. His head had been partially pieced together, and within the biggest chunk, a charred piece of central processor was visible. Indeed, Carjack's fluids had solidified. Most had dried up and turned to a powdery substance in his tubes. It was a natural reaction of his kind's body. It took a while to achieve, and no one was quite sure why, but the Energon usually dried up if it couldn't leak from the body after a certain amount of time. Spinner put his musings aside and clambered up onto the offline corpse. He scrabbled about at Carjack's dented and scuffed chest armour. Once he found sufficient purchase on a seam, he tugged with all his strength. The alien metal gave a

weak groan and nothing more. Spinner sat on his haunches and huffed, a finger tapping his chin thoughtfully.

He'd need to go about this another way. He made his way further down Carjack's body and started tugging at the weaker abdominal plating. Much to his relief, they came away, but not without protest. Spinner peeled one back, then another and another until he could see clearly into Carjack's chest cavity. The upgrade had severely warped his innards. Wiring was bunched and twisted unnaturally together, entangled upon inner support struts. Spinner pushed some wires and thin pipes aside, cutting some away just so he could climb in. It was a morbid thing to do, even by Decepticon standards, but if he couldn't get to the Space Bridge node via the chest plating, then he had to use other options or be stranded on Nymex for many more years to come. He wanted to go home. He wanted to be surrounded by his own kind so *much* it almost hurt. He wriggled in and continued cutting away at wiring until he came to what he was looking for. Just beneath the intricately set up spherical Spark Chamber, was the device he'd been after. He carefully un-hooked it from its moorings, keeping all the necessary wiring intact, grateful that the upgrade hadn't damaged or even changed the device. He held it close for a moment, inspecting it, turning it over and over in his spindly hands. He gave slight squeek of appreciation and proceeded to wriggle out of the confines of Carjack's body. Once outside, he admired the device once more. It was quite amazing at how much power such a small device could contain. All he had to do now, was to attach it to himself. A task easier said than done without the correct equipment. Spinner tucked it away within his armour plating and made for the door. He needed to find a lab that contained some aspect of decent tools for his use. As he reached for the door handle, he paused. There were no sounds. He wasn't picking up any activity on his radar. But it wasn't that that made him stop. He slowly looked over his shoulder and at the drawn curtains. He hurried back under them and made his way towards where Carjack's head lay in pieces. Four more pairs of optics had developed during his mutation, the smallest out of the six pairs being the size of an organic's head. One of the smallest optics, protective lense intact, was completely detached from the rest of the head. Thin wiring trailed from behind it, covered in the same, semi-solidified liquid that encased the larger Decepticon's central processor. A few lengths of black metal jutted from around the semi-intact socket that had once housed the lense. Spinner gingerly touched it, running a finger across the scarred surface of the lense. He picked the loose optic up and made for the door once more, this time not stopping. He'd got what he'd come for. Now he needed to complete the next part of his task.

## 6 - Curiosity And Suspicion

### Ankmor

Roadtrain and Hookshot sat on a felled pylon just beyond their base's perimeter, looking out across across the twisted wreckage of a wasteland. Hookshot was idly thumbing a deep dent in his thigh and Roadtrain appeared to be in a world of his own. After a moment, Hookshot made an odd noise and looked up.

"I wonder why Jetstream hasn't gone for that report yet..." He wondered out loud.

Roadtrain dipped his head and looked at the ground between his feet.

"Dunno... But she sure has been acting weird about it... Skittish, y'know? As if she's gonna be ground into iron filings for not showing up dead on time." The old transporter said.

"Well, everybody's scared of upsetting the big boss. Even Krusher. I've heard rumours about Megatron..." Hookshot said slowly.

Roadtrain eyed him cautiously.

"You wanna be careful. That kinda thing can get a bot dismantled in the most horrible of ways." He replied levelly. He paused momentarily. "What kind of rumours...?"

"That he's Unicron reincarnate." Hookshot said simply.

Roadtrain started to laugh hard, to the point he almost toppled from his perch.

"What?! With his temper, it may as well be true!" Hookshot said defensively.

Roadtrain finally managed to sober himself, but still remained highly amused.

"In all honesty? If I believed in the whole reincarnation thing? I might believe that one." He chuckled.

The sound of metal scraping against metal echoed from the base behind them. Both Decepticons looked over their armoured shoulders and watched as Jetstream launched from the upper runway that lay secreted away in the side of the main building. Once she was free of the confines of the base, she sped up. But she didn't appear to be on a direct heading to Polyhex.

"Maybe she's trying to throw off any watching Autobots." Hookshot commented before Roadtrain could even speak.

"More than likely. She's a smart one. But still..." Roadtrain slid from his perch and proceeded to transform.

"Where you going?!" Hookshot asked as Roadtrain started to drive away.

"If Krusher asks, it's a business run." He replied bluntly and accelerated after the swiftly moving form of Jetstream.

"But-! Ooohhh..." Hookshot groaned. "Not again..."

He raised his hand to pinch the bridge of his nose in frustration, but quickly caught himself doing it. It was an all too Human reaction.

"Spent too much time among the repulsive organics..." He grumbled sourly as he watched both Decepticons move further toward the horizon.

The Constructicon waited a moment longer then redirected his gaze back toward base. A previous conversation about the fembot was still niggling away at him in the back of his mind. Unlike the others, she didn't much care for talking about what she got up to when there wasn't a task to be done. Even Krusher let them have a little insight into what he got up to during his rare free time. Jetstream never did that. It was all business or nothing at all. Not a hint about her real personality beyond her professional

exterior. Of course, there were other bots like that. Ones who liked to go about their jobs and spend no time having casual conversation with their friends. It was how they liked it. It avoided bringing any past torments to the surface. Steele had joked that she was keeping a dirty secret and Turbulance had taken it one step further and they'd ended up in a discussion about one another's kinks that somehow turned into a conversation about the local bars. Harmless conversation, something to pass the time when nothing interesting was happening. But everytime a question was directed at Jetstream, she'd neatly avert it, twist it and somehow changed the subject. No one really noticed it until they were halfway through the new subject. And as of late, she'd started acting different. Strange, even.

Hookshot set aside his thoughts and made his way back into the base. Darkness was falling and he had to break the news to Krusher that Roadtrain had driven off again with no pre-warning. Krusher would not be impressed. He never was when Roadtrain did that. And Hookshot was sure he'd catch the brunt of Krusher's anger. He hesitated at the main doors. Like the rest of the building, the doors were black metal and practically faceless. The base was an imposing sight, like the rest of the Decepticon bases, even to those who dwelled within them. He pressed a blue pad at the side of the door and a small green light flashed on. The doors gave a slight protesting squeek as they slid open. Directly inside, was another set of doors, a see-through set, the main foyer lurking in partial darkness beyond those. There was large, silver, elegantly designed reception desk directly opposite the entrance. Scattered around, chairs of various shapes and sizes remained. The building had been some kind of trading post prior to the Decepticon take-over. Krusher had ordered another layer be built around the still-intact buildings; reinforcement for any Autobot attacks. Hookshot made his way through another set of doors and stood for a moment in the main reception area. He wasn't keen on the idea of telling Krusher bot to bot that Roadtrain had done another disappearing act, so he walked over to the desk and flicked on a computer. The monitor crackled and the computer whirred in protest of not having been used for several years. When the static settled on the screen, he opened a com-line through to the main control room. Almost instantly, the com-link was answered, and Krusher's menacing visage appeared on-screen.

"What is it this time?" He rumbled, his appearance and voice flickering with static.

"Roadtrain's gone off on some business, sir." Hookshot replied, almost unsure that he should be doing this.

"What kind of business?" Krusher demanded.

Hookshot hesitated and proceeded to form a careful reply.

"Business business." He replied and then promptly gave himself a mental punch in the face.

Krusher glared at him through the screen.

"Where exactly is this *business* taking him to this time?"

Again, Hookshot's mind floundered. He was rubbish with making up excuses and was praying that Krusher would buy whatever one he would come up with next.

"Cyber City, I think. Sir."

"Is this business of his so important to him that he has to go without an escort?! Cyber City is *leagues away!*" Krusher started to rage.

"Should I go after him?" Hookshot hazarded.

"No! If he get's reduced to scrap by the Autobots, then it's his own fault."

The screen then went blank. Hookshot sagged down into the battered chair behind him and stared at the static filled screen.

"Oh Primus..." He sighed unhappily. "It's gonna be one of those cycles... Roadtrain owes me big." He muttered.

### Nymex 3 - Moto-Motel

The sun streaked through the gaps in the curtains, stirring the Fox from his sleep. George rolled over in bed. Then awoke. He kept his eyes closed as his nose pressed up against something flat and cold. A paw, half controlled by natural reflex, half controlled by morbid curiosity, reached up and out to touch the object his nose was pressed against. His paw ran across a finely scratched, but otherwise perfectly smooth surface until it came to the conclusion that whatever the object was, was relatively big and was sat on the pillow next to his head. He cautiously opened one eye to a crack and peered out. The sun that filtered into the room illuminated the solid sheet before him a dim red. Behind the solid wall of red, many strips of intricately positioned metal swirled from the outer edges of a circular frame and connected with each other in the center forming something much akin to a pupil. George opened his eyes and pulled his head back to get a better look. He yelped and skittered backwards across the bedsheets, not stopping until he fell to the floor. He lay hunched on the floor, eyes wide, ears flat, tail fluffed in horror. After a moment's pause to regain control of his hammering heart and flailing mind, he carefully peeked over the bed. Indeed, it was an eye; the thin, metal strips that were woven together being an alien iris set behind a protective lense of red. Parts of the optical socket was still in place, clinging to the lense in small, twisted and charred plates of dark silver metal that bordered on black. George whimpered and ducked back down. He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. *It's all a dream, it's just a dream!* He repeated to himself. But when he hazarded another look on his bed, the optic was still there, staring blankly at him, unfocused and dead. He ducked down again, pressing himself flat against the floor and the bedside set of drawers, wide eyes searching the room. He knew where the optic came from. And he had an intense idea of who put it on his pillow. Now he was absolutely sure that his washing machine would keep up its threat. George would lose his flesh, and it'd more than likely happen very soon. He swallowed hard and winced. His mouth was dry and it hurt to swallow. He needed a drink. But to get to the kitchen, he'd have to stand up and face the alien eye.

*No. I'll crawl...* He thought robustly. The optic really did give him the creeps.

He shifted position and crawled on his paws and knees into the kitchen area. He pulled himself up to his feet, his knees clicking in protest. He took a glass from the over head cupboard and filled it with cold water from the tap. *Surely the science geeks'll notice that one of their precious components is suddenly missing.* He thought sourly. *How the frack am I gonna get it back into the labs without anyone noticing?* He groaned and dipped his head, bracing himself against the sink with one paw. He sighed heavily and drained his glass. *This is gonna be interesting...* He put the glass in the sink and turned around to face the bed. The optic was sat right on the edge of the bed, coated wiring hanging free from the back of the mechanism, trailing to the floor. George eyed the pile of luggage. He approached the pile and un-zipped the duffel bag, emptying it of it's contents. He dumped his clothes on the bed then proceeded to change into them. Once dressed, he gingerly picked the optic up. It was heavier than he had anticipated and he almost dropped it. He bundled it into the duffel bag, hiding it away with his dirty clothes. He zipped the bag back up and admired it for a moment. So long as he made out that the bag didn't feel like it weighed a tonne, he might pull off getting the alien eye back into its lab. He grabbed his toothbrush and toothpaste and cautiously made his way into the small bathroom. He set them down on the narrow shelf above the sink and carefully pulled the shower curtain back. He lept in front of the exposed space as if ready to attack. There was nothing there. George couldn't help but chuckle. What was he going to do against a psychotic machine that could change its shape at will? Very little, and as much as the thought scared him, he still had to laugh at it. It was certainly going to be an interesting day. Possibly even a painful one, too.

## Gygax

Flashpoint loomed over Raid, who was sat on the edge on the repair table. The large medic was making some minor adjustments to Raid's new optics, which had just been installed.

"Tell me when your vision clears up." Flashpoint said in a mildly detached and distant sounding voice.

"I would if you weren't obscuring my view." Raid replied bluntly and without temper.

Flashpoint made an odd noise somewhere within the depths of his vocal processor and shuffled to one side as he continued fiddling around with the fine wiring of his commander's new optics.

"Better or worse?" He asked after a moment.

"Worse. All I can see is static." Raid replied evenly.

"Nnnnow...?" Flashpoint hazarded slowly.

"Getting better. The static's clearing up."

"How about now?"

The parts of the medi-bay that Raid could see wavered then straightened.

"Yes. Much better."

"Alright, a little test." Flashpoint said, putting his small tools to one side and pulling the set of magnifying lenses from his face. "What's that?" He asked as he pointed at a thin, black structure that protruded from the floor and vanished into the ceiling.

"It looks like an electrical conduit." Raid said flatly.

"And that?"

"Your desk lamp."

"What about that?"

Raid hesitated a moment.

"Uh, a screw driver?" He hazarded.

"No. That's one of my many stylus's." Flashpoint said.

Raid looked at him. For the first time in several years, he could see the face of one of his oldest friends without the aid of the Solstice's scanning and security equipment. He smiled and Flashpoint returned it. "Admittedly, since your new optics have only just been installed, it'll take a while for your vision to adjust and become as clear as it was prior to the uh, *incident* with Krusher." He said carefully. "Some smaller objects may appear to be blurry from a distance, while other, much larger objects will appear as normal. The blurriness should only take a few days to clear up, so if you intend on doing any long-distance target practice, please do so with the target facing *away* from any remaining Autobot civilisation that's within the area."

Raid made a face and slid from the table.

"Yes doctor." He replied obediently with a slight mocking edge to his tone.

## Ankmor - Border

Roadtrain continued to follow Jetstream as she made her way toward her destination. Even though she was in vehicle mode and was flying, she was moving with an aire of caution, changing her trajectory every now and then. One moment she'd be flying east, the next, she'd change her mind and fly west for a couple of hours. Roadtrain was getting fed-up of the whole stalking thing. He was a transporter, not a spy. He didn't dare contact her incase it threw her off her original plan, whatever it was. No, as much as

he hated it, he hung back and stuck to the shadows of the various wreckages that littered the landscape. He just hoped that she hadn't noticed him already and was flying erratically to try and throw him off. But then, if she had noticed him, wouldn't she have said something? Confronted him about it? *There's something really wrong with this...* He thought and sped up as he drove around a massive crater in the metallic ground.

## 7 - Some Minor Torment

### Nyxen 3 - George's Workplace

George looked around the vast lab, duffel bag in paw. He had been lucky to get past security, after they'd learned that an intruder had attacked and killed one of the duty guards the previous night. George just flashed his ID and carried on, making his way into the depths of the labs, making up some excuse about needing to inspect one of the ongoing projects. And now, he stood in the same room as one of those ongoing projects. The two scientists who were running it jointly were still talking to the police about the goings on of the previous night. Unfortunately, George had a perfectly good idea about who had killed the security guard. The same creature that had planted the severed optic on his pillow. George had another look around at his surroundings and ducked behind the heavy white curtains. Beyond them, he froze in place. He'd heard about this project, even seen pictures and news reports. But this was the first time he'd seen it up close. The creature was huge. Almost filling the room, which was the biggest room in the building and had originally been designed for bulk storage of crates and shipping containers. He remembered coming down here on his first day of work and finding four heavily laden lorries parked neatly in this very room. Now, it was filled with just one thing. The mechanical creature's feet were pressed up against the solid, reinforced steel garage door at the bottom, the remains of its head up against the wall opposite. George pulled his mind back on track and hurriedly made his way toward the end with the head. He dumped his bag on the floor and un-zipped it. He unravelled the optic from his swath of creased clothes and unfurled the wiring that hung from the back of the optic. He gently placed it down on the thick white dust sheet next to the other five optics and zipped his bag up again. From somewhere beyond the curtain, the door to the makeshift lab opened. A single set of foot steps entered. George held his breath and slowly picked his bag up. The curtains at his back moved and a Whippet appeared, dressed in a knee-length black skirt, a white blouse and a long white coat. Various coloured pens and a few pencils protruded from the top pocket of her lab coat. She adjusted her thin rimmed glasses and looked at George curiously.

"Can I help you...?" She asked.

George stared at her for a moment. Then he flashed his ID at her and smiled.

"Uh, no, not really. Just checking out your progress, is all." He said hastily, gesturing at the twisted and charred mess that made up Carjack's head and neck.

"Well Mr. Furman," She said politely, "as you can see, we're making significant progress in piecing this creature back together. Unfortunately, we think that there's still some pieces missing from it."

"Oh?"

She gestured at an area of Carjack's neck.

"Here. The otherside of this beast's neck is still relatively intact, so we can plainly see that there's a metal support rod missing and several armour plating sections. As for the head, I don't quite know what we're missing..." She trailed off uncertainly.

George wandered down the length of the body, putting on a performance about inspecting it. He stopped at the abdominal area and frowned. A few of the abdominal platings were peeled back or had been removed.

"In the reports it said that only the head and neck sustained serious damage and that the body only had minor scrapes and dents..." He said slowly, eyeing up the large hole.

The Whippet hurried up to him. Then she faltered at what George had pointed out.

"That wasn't there yesterday." She said after a moment.

Then she climbed up onto the offline Decepticon and did a little inspection of her own. She ran a fingertip across the length of a scar on one of the armour plates and Hmmed.

"This isn't right..." She muttered. "We've tried for years to crack through this monster's armour. And now, it's just been peeled open like an orange..."

After a moment's pause she suddenly looked up and directed her gaze at George.

"These scratches weren't made by any of our tools." She said hurriedly. "I think one his friends might still be here..."

George's shoulders sagged and an eye twitched. He really didn't want to be discussing the subject of mechanical aliens right now. Especially when he knew who - *what* - made a mess of the offline alien that lay before him. Little did they know, that it was Spinner, that same small Decepticon that often terrorized George's dreams, who was the downfall of the large, warped Decepticon that lay with his head in pieces before them. A chill ran up his spine.

"I want a full report of this as soon as possible." He said and turned away, ducking back through the curtains.

George let the lab door close behind him. He clung to the duffel bag and made his way back upstairs, to where the offices were. In the lobby, he stepped onto an elevator and went up to his floor. The doors opened with a polite *ping* and he cautiously stepped off the lift. Of course, the machine would be back in its place beneath the sideboard in what was once his home. But that didn't stop his imagination from running amuck. What if there were more of the transforming machines lurking around? What if his washing machine had relatives, and one of them was lurking in his office, ready to strike? Or even if one had taken up its place beneath the sideboard to play household appliance while the real one was creeping around the office block, searching for him? George shuddered. He was at his office door now. He hesitated a moment, paw on the handle, ready to push the door open. He took a deep breath and went in, ready to be pounced on. But nothing happened. He stood within his office and all was silent and in place. He walked around the room, looking under his desk as he went. He was the only occupant. He closed his door and went back to his desk, sitting down heavily in his chair.

He stared at his clock for several minutes, mind empty of all thoughts. A breeze blew in from the open window behind him, tickling the fur on the back of his neck. He idly reached a paw back and scratched at the area of his neck that itched then came out of his stare. He turned around in his chair. He hadn't opened the window when he came in. And he hadn't left it open yesterday, either. There was a slight oily tinge to the air. He inhaled deeply, nostrils flaring as he sniffed hard. There was also the slight scent of wet clothes and washing powder, too. He started to slowly rise from his chair. Something on the other side of his desk made a solid thump against the thickly carpeted floor. George paused, knees bent, paw flat on his desk to brace himself in such an awkward stance. His ears were perked high, eyes wide. He slowly looked to the side, to the location of the noise. A low, electronic sounding hiss rose from the floor. George swallowed hard. He hazarded a look over his desk and promptly fell back with a scream. Spinner screeched at him as he leapt up and onto the desk, talon-like feet scratching the polished surface to hell.

"Give me your flesh!" Spinner leered, snapping sharp, metal claws together.

George screamed again and took off for the door. Spinner let him go. He'd come in through the window, and that's the way he would go out. The Decepticon cackled and hopped neatly from the table. He could hear people comming. They were comming to find out why George had flipped out and ran screaming from the building. Spinner climbed out of the window and shimmied down the metal drain pipe. Jumping

the final two storeys he landed heavily on the tarmac below. His head swung around on the end of his long, flexible neck. There were people about, but they were preoccupied by the police and the Fox that was now running from the building in a state of utter panic. Spinner ducked into the bushes opposite with a snigger and pursued the frantic organic.

### Iacon

Roadtrain slowly trundled to a stop as the large, domed city came into view. He was worn out, energy levels running horribly low. He stayed in the shadows of a wreckage that he assumed was once a storage building of some sort. He doubted that any wandering Autobots would take it upon themselves to attack him. He had no weaponry to speak of and his armour was flimsy at best. In short, he wasn't considered much of a threat, if one at all. The most he could do was throw a few punches and insults around and hope that he moved quick enough to not be rendered into a heap of scrap metal. He looked on as Jetstream landed before the extending bridge of the great, walled city. His powerful optics homed in on her. She looked around cautiously, as if expecting to be attacked at any moment. Her posture was hunched and her movements lagging, an obvious trait that her own energy levels were running dangerously low. Roadtrain watched curiously. The bridge extended and the large doors at the other end of the massive walkway opened. Several Autobot guards were stood directly inside the city gates. Jetstream walked past them and she was escorted away. Not in a hostile manner. She was treated more like a long lost friend. Roadtrain kept his optics on her as she walked out of sight, the gates closing behind her.

*Son of a glitch...* Roadtrain muttered to himself.

He waited for a moment longer to gather his thoughts. Then he turned around and drove off, wondering how to explain the situation to Krusher. And wondering how the large Decepticon would react to the news.

### Gygax

"How many fingers am I holding up?" Speeder asked, waving two raised digits around.

"None if you don't behave yourself." Raid rumbled as he took his seat in the command chair.

He pulled the monitor set around on its arm and read through the reports that littered the several screens before him. Blue Falcon nudged Flashpoint in the side and then scurried off to sit at his station on the otherside of the main control room with his comrades. The young Autobot looked on with intense curiosity with his friends as Flashpoint brought the subject of the Space Bridge up.

"Uhm, what're we gonna do about the other half of the Space Bridge?" He asked after a moment.

"Yeah, we got the base all hooked up and ready. We just need the pylons and the main computer." Gundog said.

"Only problem is, the Decepticons have had sufficient time to recover." Deadmetal grunted.

Raid slowly peeled his newly regained gaze away from the various monitors and pushed them aside. He looked at each of his crew levelly.

"We're still going to go get it. My long-distance sight is clearing up. I can now hit the four league target dead center again." He said.

There was low chorus of relief.

"Any ideas as to *how* we're gonna go get the second half?" Solar asked.

"I say we smash Krusher's door in and ruin his day. After all, we now outnumber his crew." Galaxy

rumbled with a slanted grin.

"I completely agree." Blue Falcon said.

"Sounds good to me." Gundog said and stretched, his limbs creaking from lack of movement.

"Short, sweet and straight to the point. Just how I like it." Speeder grinned maliciously.

Raid eyed Galaxy for a long moment. The large Autobot didn't even shift under his gaze.

"Let's do it." He said bluntly after a moment.

"Really?" Blue Falcon blurted.

"You mean, we get to go in, all guns blazin', shoot the place up and take no prisoners?" Gundog asked, rising from his seat.

Raid also rose from his seat, bringing himself to his full height.

"Got it in one. And we go now." He said.

Now all Autobots were on their feet, mild bemusement shifting very quickly to a morbid form of eagerness.

"Speeder, I'll need to disable whatever security systems Krusher has set up." Raid said. "I don't want him knowing we're there until his front door's in pieces." He said. "Deadmetal, Gundog, you'll be covering him incase he's spotted by one of the Decepticons."

"I suggest we spread out as we move in on the base. If he picks us up on any radar scans, then we'll be all over the place and not bunched together." Deadmetal said.

"Sounds good to me." Galaxy said. "You guys can go in the front door. I think I might just drop in." She then grinned.

"Right, team up and pick a direction." Raid said.

### Nyxen 3

George scurried around the corner of the building and pressed himself against the wall. He panted hard and sweat matted his orange fur. He blinked hard a couple of times and hazarded a look around the corner. Nothing. No sign of a psychotic robotic washing machine. Just people. People and cars, all going about their daily lunch time business. George heaved a sigh and sank to his heels, head against the wall. He closed his eyes momentarily, listening to his heart pounding in his chest. How long had he been running? Where was that wretched machine? Surely he hadn't outran it. Had he...? From somewhere ahead, a bin clattered to the ground, spilling its rancid, overripe contents across the cracked concreted ground. George's eyes snapped open and he sprang to his feet. A feral Raccoon scurried into the shadows with a piece of discarded food in its mouth. George sighed again. His heart felt like it was going to explode inside his chest. Then there was a low, electronic sounding growl to his left. He didn't bother looking. He knew there'd be three piercing red eyes staring at him, hidden, metallic mandibles clacking together in anticipation of what was yet to come. George took to his heels again and ran across the road. The sound of squeeling tyres, car horns and angry shouts followed in his wake. Spinner watched the Fox run again. He'd been at it all morning. And the amusement of chasing him was starting to wear off. It was time to kick it up a level. The chase would end, and it would end painfully. Spinner turned around and made his way across the small, concreted area behind the buildings and climbed the brick wall, disappearing over the otherside with a dull *thump*. It was now time, he decided, to wait for the sun to go down. Then he could go home, back to Cybertron.

## 8 - Dropping In For A Visit

### Ankmoor

Flanked by Gundog and Deadmetal, Speeder peered over the top of the slab of twisted metal. The three Autobots were just out of range of the Decepticon's security systems and were now contemplating on how to go about breaking through the defences without being noticed.

"How about a combined EMP burst?" Deadmetal asked after a moment.

"It could work." Speeder replied slowly. "But I'm not entirely sure how far upwards the security system reaches."

"If it's in a typical dome pattern, then it'll be a league up, right? I reckon we could drop an EMP on their heads from above." Gundog said, looking at the tip of the dark building that sat hunkered in the distance.

"You don't have an EMP, though." Speeder pointed out.

"I know. But, to my knowledge, *Galaxy does*." He replied with a slight grin. "I'll stick here with you, while Dee and our very own harbinger of doom disable the systems long enough for you to do your thing.

Once the EMP's dropped, we re-group."

Deadmetal's expression went blank for the briefest of moments.

"I've relayed the idea to Galaxy. She's up for it." Deadmetal said bluntly.

"Are you?" Speeder asked.

"Naturally." He replied and took off at a perfect vertical. "I'll come back as soon as it's done."

"Try not to deplete yourself too badly this time, yeah?!" Speeder called after him as he transformed to vehicle mode and moved away, to where Galaxy was hiding in the clouds.

Inside the dark, bleak building, Krusher paced circles in the main control room, large metallic hands at his back, optics to the floor. From one side, Steele and Hookshot looked on in silence as their leader paced in an agitated way. He was not happy. If the Autobots were to launch an attack now, then he was well and truly stuffed. He'd ousted Turbulance. Flare had gone back to her own unit, Jetstream was away on a personal report to Decepticon headquarters and Roadtrain had disappeared on one of his own, personal missions again, which left Krusher with just two Constructicons as back-up. It wasn't an ideal situation to be in.

"It's been two days, now boss." Steele said, breaking the long silence. "He could be on his way back now."

Krusher paused and glanced up, red optics narrowing dangerously on the smaller Constructicon. Steele backed down, shifting position so that he was partially shielded by the much larger, more imposing form of Hookshot.

"He better be." Krusher growled.

The lights flickered and dimmed.

"What was that...?" Hookshot said softly.

"Power surge...?" Steele hazarded.

"No..." Krusher said, turning to inspect one of the many monitors.

Three lines of data in, everything shut down, plunging all the three Decepticons into darkness. Three sets of red optics pierced the sudden blackness as the moment sank in.

"Autobots." Krusher rumbled.

"What?!" Steele yelled.

"I've said it before, and I'll say it again: We're doomed. Utterly, and hopelessly *doomed*." Hookshot said bluntly.

"Your optimism is genuinely frightening sometimes, y'know that?" Krusher grunted from the darkness, his gaze falling upon the highest set of optics.

There was a loud crashing sound from the front of the base. The three Decepticons that were left in darkness fell deathly silent. The scent of charred metal and smoke drifted through the base.

"I hope that who ever it is, they don't have Galaxy or Gundog with them..." Steele said in a hushed tone. Krusher used his intergrated radar system to scan the base. After a moment, he gave a low, growling hiss.

"Three Autobots at the front door." He whispered. "Two comming up on our aft...."

An explosion shook the base and the roof above their heads caved in in a flurry of metals, fire and smoke. The massive form of Galaxy plunged feet first into the newly opened cavity, knocking Krusher to one side. The offline computers fizzed and crackled beneath him as he collided with Steele's workstation. Hookshot and Steele looked on in dismay as Galaxy filled half the room, the dim nighttime light streaking in through the hole in the roof and pooling around her, glinting off her heavy deep green armour.

"What, no 'hello'?" She asked, mock hurt edging her tone.

There was a string of metallic clacking as a large gun was brought to bear on her forearm.

"Oooohhh...." The two Constructicons groaned as the muzzle of the large weapon was levelled at them.

"We'll be outside if you need us." Hookshot said hurriedly, and the pair ran from the room.

The doorway they vanished through exploded in a fountain of shrapnel, leaving a gaping hole in the wall. From beside her, Krusher growled and lunged at her. He brought one of his own weapons to bear and shot at her knee, shattering an exposed support strutt. He sailed neatly past behind her and took another shot at the same area before landing and rolling back to his feet. Galaxy howled in frustration, her knee sparking furiously as the second shot tore through the already damaged joint. She collapsed into a crouching position and swung for Krusher, hitting him hard in the chest, sending him into another set of computers.

He landed with a grunt and scabbled out of the way as the large Autobot shuffled neatly on one knee and brought her fist down into the set of computers that he had just been occupying. He stepped over the debris and circled awkwardly around her, his limbs creaking slightly with each movement.

"And *what* do you think yer doing back there?!" She growled angrily.

Krusher started prying the metal plating apart at her back. Her wings shuddered, clacking metallicly as she twisted, trying to get a grip on him. But he foresaw what she wanted to do and evaded each awkward attempt at a grab. From further toward the front of the base, he heard Hookshot and Steele. Both had engaged in combat. He tore a piece of scarred, orange armour from the segmented area between Galaxy's main wings, revealing the thin layer of wires that shrouded the flimsy metal plating beneath. He grabbed a fistful of the wires and pulled. Sparks jittered and Energon spotted from a few of the thin pipes that were neatly entangled within the web wires. Galaxy hissed and the world around Krusher tilted drunkenly and he suddenly found himself pinned beneath her weight. His armour buckled, in some places pressing hard against the sensitive circuitry beneath. Pain registered deep within his systems and he let out a muffled, electronic yelp. A shudder of delight coursed through Galaxy's large frame as she heard his pain and felt his chest armour start to buckle beneath her. Raid's voice floated into the main control room. He was doling out orders for Flashpoint, Speeder and Blue Falcon to start retrieving the final parts of the Space Bridge. She rolled to one side and hunkered down in a crouch.

Krusher flailed momentarily in place before attempting to stand. She watched as he started to pull himself upright. He growled something unintelligible, a single red optic half focused on her. She used her good leg to push herself forward, and an open hand slammed into his head, thick metallic fingers gripping tightly. She tugged him downwards, slamming him hard into the ground, the aged and abused metal sheets crackling and moaning under the impact. There was a slight, restless twitch from the Decepticon sub-commander, then he went still.

*"Galaxy: Report."* Came the transmitted order from Raid.

*"Krusher's down, but not out. I have minor damage to my left leg, some scrapes and dents, but otherwise I'm still functioning."* She replied.

She tried looking over her shoulder at the damage, but her wings were obscuring her view.

*"You require help with the Bridge parts?"* She asked as she struggled to her feet, putting her weight on her intact leg.

*"Negative. Leave Krusher. We can deal with him later. Cover Flash from above and return to base."* He said.

The line went silent. She heard the beating of rotar blades. Deadmetal and Gundog were on the move. She engaged her propulsion system and took off through the way she'd come in, sending debris particles swirling and dancing in small vortexes around her as she rocketed off into the night.

*"What in the name of Primus did you two do?!"* She asked as she drew even with them.

Both smaller Autobots were in vehicle mode, and bore bent and blackened armour. Gundog looked as if he took the brunt of the excursion.

*"Steele decided he wanted a little payback for the whole putting-a-hole-in-his-chest thing. Hookshot decided he wanted in on it too."* Gundog said nonchalantly.

*"I honestly had no idea how much firepower Steele actually had."* Deadmetal mused. *"I'm actually quite impressed. It's weird..."* He added slowly.

*"What did you do to them?"* Galaxy asked, somewhat intrigued.

*"Beat them up."* Gundog replied flatly. *"It was the natural thing to do."*

Galaxy snorted in amusement. They passed across the border and back into Autobot territory.

*"What about you?"* Gundog asked after a moment.

He'd spent the last few minutes of silence watching Flashpoint, Blue Falcon and Speeder as they awkwardly hauled the last pieces of the Space Bridge across the battle scarred terrain and back toward their own base.

*"Minor scuffle with Krusher."* She replied and tried flexing her damaged leg.

A spike of pain jabbed at her knee and the joint sparked.

*"And how'd he fair this time?"* Deadmetal asked curiously.

*"I dunno. You'll have to ask him when he comes-to."* She grinned.

*"If he comes-to."* Deadmetal corrected.

### *Nyxen 3 - Furman Household*

George slid up beside his house. The bushes rustled and he froze. His ears rotated and nostrils flared as he tried to work out what was in the bushes. There was the slight scent of washing powder and damp cloth on the breeze. He fumbled for the front door key in his pocket and took a deep breath. He sprinted around the corner and to the front door. Behind him came the sound of metal feet scampering across gravel. He forced the key into the lock, turned it and almost fell through the threshold. He slammed the

door shut behind him and leaned up against it, panting heavily, eyes wide and unfocused.

"I thought I told you to get out of this house!" Mavis raged as she strode into the living room.

George flinched from his stupor and eyeballed the plump vixen who was striding towards him with purpose and menace.

"Yes, yes. But, y'see-" He started, fumbling for the right words.

"No excuses!" She snapped irritably and gripped an ear between forefinger and thumb.

"Aaahhhh-!" George gasped as he was pulled away from the front door.

Mavis turned the door knob and George grabbed her paw, ignoring the pain searing through his ear.

"Don't! It's out there!" He blurted urgently.

"What's out there?" She demanded to know.

"The... The..." He faltered, hunching down, pulling Mavis's paw down with him. "That horrible, spindly robot..." He whispered.

He batted her paw away and scooted into the corner behind the door, dishevelled tail wrapping around his ankles as he brought his knees to his chin.

Mavis eyed him carefully. Then she sniffed. There was the lingering scent of alcohol, but it was old.

"What the hell are you on about?"

"Vox is out to get him." Lee called from the kitchen.

"What's Vox?" Mavis asked, slightly more puzzled, but no-less irritated.

"The washing machine." Poppy giggled.

"It's been after him for years." Lee added with some amusement.

"And it's out *there*!" George hissed urgently, jabbing a finger at the closed front door.

Mavis snorted.

"The washing machine is trying to kill you?" She asked, mocking edging her tone. "And it's outside, waiting for you?"

George nodded, eyes wide.

"The washing machine is in the kitchen, washing your children's clothes!" She snapped irritably, jabbing her own index finger toward the kitchen. "If you don't believe me, have a look for yourself."

George hesitated then shuffled to his feet and slowly walked to the archway that separated the living room from the kitchen. Indeed there was a washing machine sat hunched and dented beneath the sideboard. The machine gurgled and shuddered as it went into its final spin cycle. It was identical to the one the Decepticon turned into.

"But... But... What?" He muttered, utterly puzzled.

"Now then. Since your curiosity is satisfied, you can get your drunken arse off this property." Mavis said smoothly.

George slowly turned his head and looked at Mavis sheepishly. Both his children had paused in their homework to watch him.

"That's not my washing machine..." He mumbled numbly.

"No, it's not. It's Julie's." Mavis said evenly. "Now *get out!*" She snapped angrily and marched him to the front door.

"But you don't understand!" George started to plead.

"Oh, I understand, alright." She muttered irritably.

Mavis opened the front door and shoved George outside. The door slammed shut and she deadbolted it. She then slid the chain across so that he couldn't get back in. After a moment's hesitation, he started hammering at the door, pleading to be let back in. Mavis snorted and walked back into the kitchen to continue cooking tea. George persisted for a few minutes longer. Then all went silent. Mavis sighed and

dropped some chopped carrots into the stew before giving it a stir and sitting back down at the table to read her book.

Outside, George edged his way carefully down the driveway. Three glowing red optics watched him from the side of the house. The Fox broke his stare with the machine, turned and took to his heels once more. Spinner hissed and pursued.

## 9 - Fumbling In The Dark

### Ankmor

Roadtrain was tired. He'd been on the move for the past two days without much rest and his energy levels were almost at zero. Even though he was back in Decepticon controlled territory, he still didn't much like the idea of shutting down and going into a forced stasis out in the open. And anyway, he had news to deliver. News that he dared not transmit, incase anyone else was listening in. There was a spy in the withered team of Decepticons, and it hurt to know that one of the few flyers he actually liked was the spy. Who knew how much information she'd gotten away with? It wasn't something he wanted to dwell on, but he had to. Logistics was his chief task in life, and for the Autobots to know what he's transporting unnerved him severely. Flimsy armour and no weapons didn't bode well against even a single Autobot. Unless he was bigger and stronger than said Autobot. He shunned the ever-present prospect of being torn apart to one side. He wondered how Krusher would take the news. Would he even believe him? Knowing Krusher and his stubbornness, more than likely not.

As he approached the main gates, he started to slow. The red light above the automated gates was flashing lazily and erratically. Whisps of black smoke curled into the air from beyond the wall. Roadtrain braked to a stop, heavily abused brakes squeeking somewhat as they halted his bulk from moving any further forward. After a moment, he shifted from vehicle mode and into robot mode, the pale cab of the alien truck splitting open and repositioning itself as torso armour. Roadtrain carefully approached the sealed gates and scrutinized every inch of the faceless metal. He approached the small radio that was built into one side of the frame and depressed the button there. There was a crackle of static then the line went dead. Roadtrain grunted and hefted a long, thin slice of metal that was lay wedged within a mound of haphazardly stacked debris. He inspected it, rotating it in his hands. He then forced one end between the two closed gates and heaved, his feet sliding on the strange, metallic ground as he fought to pry the gates open. He snarled something unintelligible and the gates finally gave a low metal moan and something within the frame buckled, eventually breaking under the pressure. The gates opened a crack. Roadtrain halted his efforts as his vision wavered and his arms went temporarily limp. He sank to his knees and let the charred metal bar drop to the ground with a dull clang.

"Oh man..." He wheezed. "I need a drink."

He looked through the crack between the gates that he'd opened up and froze. He could just about see the main entrance. And it'd been blown in, taking half the front wall with it.

"What the slag happened here?" He mumbled and hauled himself to his feet again.

He swayed for a moment on the spot, then gripped either edge of each gate and heaved. The gates moaned and rolled a little further back into their recesses. The resulting gap was just big enough for him to squeeze through.

He walked carefully toward the remains of the main entrance, stepping over debris as he moved. He slowly stuck his head inside. All was dark. Not even the flicker of an emergency light. A small glow caught his optic. He carefully made his way to where it was coming from. Energon dribbled across the floor, leading off in one direction. Roadtrain hesitated for a moment then proceeded to follow the trail of vital fluids. There was a low, electronic moan and he froze in mid-step. He surveyed his immediate surroundings again, scrutinizing every corner, every small crater. Nothing. There was another low moan,

and he concentrated on it, pairing it with other vocal clips that he kept stashed away in his data banks. It was Steele. Roadtrain rounded the corner and found the Constructicon, Energon dripping slowly and rhythmically from a neat slice in the side of his abdominal armour. He lay at an awkward angle, head tilted back, dull red optics staring at the dark ceiling.

"Steele? What in the name of Primus happened here?!" He asked as he knelt down beside his felled comrade.

"Autobotzzzz..." Steele muttered, sparkz leaping from his mouth.

His gaze fell limply onto Roadtrain.

"They cut off our power then attacked."

"How many?"

"All of them." Steele hissed. "They were all over us. Deadmetal, Raid, Gundog, Blue Falcon-- *All of them!*"

"Woah, ok. Calm down or you'll bust a gasket or something." Roadtrain muttered. "Where're the others?"

"Krusher's in the main command chamber. Hookshot, in the hallway. Jetstream's still away." He mumbled.

"Yeah, I know where *she* is." Roadtrain grunted quietly.

"Whut?"

"Never mind. I'll explain later."

The old transportation chief then proceeded to heave Steele to his feet, with much difficulty.

"Let's get you into the medibay." He grunted as he half walked, half dragged the Constructicon away. Halfway down the adjoining hallway, they did indeed encounter Hookshot. The much larger Constructicon was in worse shape than his smaller partner, and his optics were dark. Roadtrain propped Steele up against the wall, and he sank down into the twisted remains of a seat. Roadtrain prodded Hookshot in the side with a foot and nearly fell over backwards. Once he'd reclaimed his balance, he gave another prod with his foot and grunted something unintelligible. Hookshot's optics flared to life behind their protective lenses. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing but static and electric hissing came forth.

"How bad's the damage? Superficial, or internal?" Roadtrain asked gruffly.

He so badly needed to take a stasis nap, otherwise he'd collapse then and there.

"Hrrrrnnnnnnzzzzz....." Was his reply.

"Hey! No goin' offline on me, gottit? I ain't facing that miserable bucket of bolts on me own!" Roadtrain growled and administered a much firmer kick to Hookshot's person when his optics threatened to go dark.

"Uhn... Huh..." Hookshot gave a feeble nod and struggled into a sitting position with Roadtrain's help.

"Wait here. I'll be back in a moment..." Roadtrain muttered.

He turned around and grabbed ahold of Steele's arm and hefted him back to his feet.

"C'mon..."

With a grunt, both bots ambled awkwardly toward the nearest door. Roadtrain pushed the door open, thankful that it hadn't been locked shut like the majority of the other doors on base. He let go of Steele just inside the door, and the Constructicon promptly shuffled his way over to the work bench and started sorting through the assortment of medical tools, all the while trying not to fall over.

"Try and get him as far as the first table, Roady." Steele said as Roadtrain made his way back to Hookshot.

Roadtrain stopped before Hookshot. He swayed on the spot, his vision wavering temporarily as he sorted through his systems. He shut down his scanning systems and decided that hauling Hookshot's

bulk wouldn't require much use of his primary balancing system. Before he shut off his balancing system, he grabbed Hookshot by either arm. He locked optics with him and he twisted a tired grin.

"You ready for this?" He huffed.

Hookshot nodded numbly and a few sparks flew from his long neck, rivulets of Energon forming at his neck base. Roadtrain then shut down his primary balancing system. He kept a firm grip on Hookshot as the world around him spun. Lack of perfect balance coupled with extreme fatigue threatened to down the old mech. Instead he heaved with all his remaining might. Hookshot made an effort too, and together the severely damaged Constructicon was being dragged toward the open door of the medibay by a mech that was much smaller than he. Inside the medibay, Steele was making quick repairs to his own wounds, ignoring the minor cuts and dents, and trying his damndest to seal up the charred and Energon stained holes and slices in his armour. He looked up at the sound of metal grating against metal, and grunts and swearing. Roadtrain made it as far as the nearest repair table then collapsed in a heap with Hookshot.

"If I ain't back online.... 'fore th' boss is, give this.... To 'im...." Roadtrain awkwardly reached a hand behind his head and fumbled about for the tiny slot that had suddenly become apparent there. He pulled a small, flat silvery disc from the slot and held it out for Steele.

"What is it?" Steele asked carefully as he fumbled through the dark, his night vision outlining all objects in a multitude of colours for him to see by.

"It's... The truth... 'Bout Jets-" Roadtrain's optics then went dark as his body forced him into stasis.

Steele picked up the small data disc and turned it carefully over in his fingers. He put it away in a specialised compartment within the toughest panels of his armour and set about rigging Hookshot up to the life support systems, which was a task easier said than done when the patient was lay on the floor and the room was in the dark. It was just a relief that the only thing that wasn't rigged up to the main power supplies for the base was the medical equipment.

Once he'd sorted Hookshot out, he looked down at Roadtrain, who partially pinned beneath the crane. Steele shook his head and instantly regretted it as black and white dots danced in front of him.

"Think I might leave 'em there. Doin' no harm..." He muttered to himself. "Best go see what Krusher's damage is."

He then hobbled toward the door with a fistfull of potentially useful tools.

## Gygax

Speeder was zipping around the Space Bridge, intricate tools in hand. His tyres squeeled slightly as he skated into a neat pivot when someone called his name. He looked over toward the door and saw Raid standing just inside the threshold.

"What can I do for you today, good sir?" Speeder said with a grin.

"Just came to see how much progress is being made." Raid replied as he moved further into the chamber.

"Fine. Just got the main computer to sort out now." Speeder said as he skated around to the front of the Bridge.

He knelt down and pulled a panel off the side of the entrance to the basin. He started fiddling around with the wiring, a few sparks flying out into the open.

"How's Gundog? Heard Hookshot took him by surprise and nailed him in the back while he was waling on Steele." Speeder asked absently as he concentrated on re-wiring the Space Bridge.

"He's fine. Some minor damage to his back armour. Mainly superficial, so no life-threatening damage

was done."

"Unlike Hookshot..." Speeder prompted slowly, casting a sly look over his shoulder. "I also heard that you gave that old Constructicon quite the battering. Nearly took him offline."

"Nearly being the working word. As much as I dislike the Decepticons, I can't help but respect some of them." Raid said after a moment.

Speeder looked back over his shoulder, pausing in his re-wiring.

"Respect for their combat skills, mainly. Other than that, I don't much care if they get smelted down for spares." Raid said flatly.

"Thank Primus. Thought you'd gone soft on us then." Speeder grinned and set back to re-wiring the Space Bridge's main computer.

"The day he goes soft, is the day when he gets reduced to a molten puddle of metal on the battle field by a well aimed disruptor shot."

Both Autobots turned to see Flashpoint stood in the doorway.

"What're you up to now, Speeder?" He asked.

"Putting one of my latest ideas into practice." He replied.

He replaced the panel and stood up.

"And that would be?" Flashpoint prompted dubiously.

"Y'remember that code I used to lock up the Space Bridge when we were sent off-world to try and retrieve that micro chip from Carjack a few years back?"

"How could we forget?" Raid muttered.

"Well, I fiddled around with the coding and I made a duplicate of it. I updated the duplicate and now, hopefully, only Autobot registered codes will work."

"Have you discussed this with anyone over at central command?" Flashpoint asked.

"Yup. Joint vid conference with Perceptor, Prowl and the big bot himself. We have the primary code for the system, we're just awaiting conformation that the rest of the Autobot controlled Space Bridges have been locked into the new code grid."

"And this code will be given to all Autobots?"

Speeder shook his head.

"Only commanders and Space Bridge techies. The knowledge will be limited, as I'm hoping it'll help stop any more Space Bridge related 'hijacking'." He replied. "Well, temporarily limited, anyway. At least until we've sorted out the kinks that are more than likely to occur during the code's first usage."

"You're a genius in disguise, y'know that?" Flashpoint said after a moment.

"Well, I'm not one to blow my own horn, but... Yes. Yes I am." Speeder replied somewhat cockily.

### Ankmo

When Krusher came back online, he was staring at the dimly lit ceiling of the medibay. He looked to one side, his neck creaking in the process. Hookshot was lay on the repair table next to him, various wires trailing from various areas of his body. A lone machine blipped, miming the rythmic pulsating of his Spark. He tilted his head a little more and just in the corner of his line of vision, saw Roadtrain slumped in a chair, arms hanging over the edges of the seat, head tilted back and optics dark. Unlike Hookshot, the Logistics Officer looked remarkably unscathed.

"Uhm, sir?" Came a unusually small voice. "If you're capable fo doing so, you might want to see the new information that Roadtrain's gathered..."

Krusher grunted and laborously pulled himself into a sitting position on the table. After a moment of

static clouding his vision from the sudden movement, he swung his thick legs over the edge of the table and looked at Steele who'd taken on a rather meek posture, the dim lighting in the medibay making the Constructicon look much smaller than he really was.

"What is it?" Krusher growled and put a large metallic hand to his battered head.

"Uh, a breach in security, sir. A *major* breach in security." Steele replied nervously.

Krusher locked gazes with the Constructicon. Then he removed himself from the repair table and ambled stiffly over to the work bench where a monitor was displaying a static filled still image.

"Sorry, but I had to check that the data disc was still intact after his unexpected journey. Just uhm, try not to blow a fuse or something when you see what it contains..." Steele said and backed away from the large form of his commander as he loomed over the monitor.

From his chair, a single optic flickered to life. Roadtrain surveyed the room. Krusher had started watching what he had recorded. His other optic lit up. Now fully energized, he rose to his feet and sidled over to where Steele was standing, clutching something that resembled a large crowbar somewhat protectively.

Both looked on in a mixture of interest and worry. When the monitor went black, Krusher didn't move. His optics remained fixated on the black screen. His grip on the workbench tightened, buckling and tearing the metal. There was a low, electronic growl.

"Get me Jetstream." He said quietly in a horribly calm tone.

"Why not let her come to us? I'm pretty sure she doesn't know that I-"

Roadtrain's words were quashed somewhere within the vicinity of his vocal processors as Krusher turned to look at him. The large Decepticon loomed over the two, optics ablaze, the rotar blades at his back trembling slightly and sending a soft metallic clinking sound resonating through the room.

"I don't care if she saw you or not. I want her here *now!* **AND I WANT HER ALIVE!**" Krusher raged, encroaching on the two. "You will bring her to me in one piece and fully operational, *understand?!*" He then spun around on an alloyed heel and slammed a fist down into the workbench, putting a large hole in it.

"**I'm going to dismantle that wretched spy alive!**" He howled angrily.

"Uhm, sir-"

"**MOVE IT!**" He screamed at them.

Roadtrain and Steele backed down into their corner momentarily, optics wide. It was only when the enraged Krusher put a hole in the wall above their heads did they comply and make a hasty retreat to the safety of the outside world.

## 10 - An Unwelcome Experience

### Ankmor

Steele followed Roadtrain closely, driving around the larger pieces of debris he couldn't get over in vehicle mode. His metal treads clanked and squeaked every-now-and-then as he trundled quickly across the scarred surface of Cybertron. For the past couple of hours since leaving base in a hurry, Roadtrain had been vocally quiet. Only the unsteady rumbling of his engine gave way to how he was feeling right now.

"Sure she's gonna come back this way...?" Steele asked hesitantly.

Roadtrain remained silent. Steele slowed and cast a look around at the devastated land.

"No." Was the low, rumbling reply.

Steele's attention snapped back into place.

"Oh. D'you think maybe she's taken another route back to base?" He asked bluntly.

"Which base?" Came the sour reply.

Steele hesitated in his reply. Roadtrain had a point. Was she coming back to their base, or going elsewhere? Did she even know that they now knew about her real purpose in the war? A small part of him hoped so. He'd grown to like Jetstream as much as the others had. But as much as he disliked her right now, he still didn't want her to be subjected to Krusher's wrath. They'd all faced his anger numerous times. But that was over petty, insignificant things compared to this. This was treason, not failing to complete a mission or poking fun at the boss. This was possibly the most heinous crime of all. The sound of a jet engine tore through the silence and both Decepticon's thoughts. They looked up, locating the sound almost immediately. A familiar silver and pale blue marked shaped split the low hanging clouds.

"Looks like she is heading back to base afterall." Roadtrain grunted.

He slammed on his brakes and his tires squealed in loud protest as he slid around to face the other direction.

"I gotta see this." He sneered and accelerated away, back towards base.

Steele hesitated a moment, unmoving in his position. He then turned around and chased after Roadtrain and the fast receding form of Jetstream.

### Nyxen 3

George collapsed against the chainlink fence, his breath coming in short, hard pants. His lungs were burning, heart hammering and he was soaked through with sweat. He couldn't recall the last time he'd ran so much. Infact, he didn't think he'd run so much in his entire life. But he had to keep running. He had to keep moving. Especially if he wanted to survive. He cracked a blood shot eye open and surveyed the haggard space he'd ran into. It was enclosed; two chainlink fences and two brick walls surrounding it. The concrete ground was so abused that it was more like gravel, with weeds and grass creeping up from wherever it could find room. There was an old telegraph pole behind him, stood crookedly in the corner, overlooking the long forgotten postage stamp of a yard along with the tree that was slowly but surely making its way over and through the fence. He groaned and sagged. He could hear those needley metallic feet getting closer and closer once more. And it was getting dark. And he was out of energy. He

struggled back to his feet and leaned against the fence, eyes fixated upon the entrance to the secreted away yard. He'd made a bad mistake by coming here. And he knew it as soon as his backside had touched the concrete. A tall, spindly figure crept into the shadows that lurked within the entrance to the yard. George gritted his teeth and slowly sidled towards a lump of wood that looked as if it had been dislodged from someone's garden fence. He picked the length of wood up gingerly and wielded it awkwardly like a weapon. A light, electronic snigger floated across the small expanse. George twitched numbly. The machine crept forward, fingers rearranging themselves, giving birth to long, impossibly thin alien blades. George swallowed hard and adjusted his grip on his lump of rotten wood. Spinner crouched low and lept at the Fox. George swung the wood as hard as he could. The air was sliced and the wood was cut cleanly in half. He kicked out then howled in pain and fell over. Blood poured from his left foot where Spinner had pierced it.

"So predictable." The Decepticon hissed irritably.

He raised one hand, showing off the blade that'd been forced neatly through George's foot. Blood glistened intently on the blade as the street lamps nearby snuck their false light into the secluded area and touched the metal. Spinner sniggered again and then landed a bird-like foot on George's chest, forcing him all the way to the ground. Spinner leaned over him. George looked up with wide eyes and into the red optics that loomed over him. An alien alloyed hand shot forward, rearranging itself and gripped his muzzle tightly, tilting his head to one side. George looked on out of the corner of a wide eye as a blade was brought close to his face. He gripped the machine's limbs and tried to force it off of him, but Spinner held fast, not even twitching under the organic's need to remove him from his soft body.

"Hmmm...." Spinner cooed innocently. "I wonder what it's like beneath..."

A blade tip, sharper than a scalpel sliced neatly through the skin of his jaw. Blood seeped lazily out, matting the fine fur there and tinting it red. George squealed in pain, the odd noise becoming muffled and lost in his shut muzzle. His paws tightened on Spinner's legs as razor sharp pain crept along his jaw. Spinner paused a moment, silently contemplating the fidgeting Fox beneath him. He re-applied the blade to George's jaw and traced the cut along his lower jaw line, cutting until he reached his throat. Spinner stopped just as he was about to cut into softer flesh. He made a few more cuts to the same area and slid a needle-like finger tip under the flap of skin he'd created. George yelped, tears forming in his eyes. The Fox's fidgeting did nothing but keep the weight of the Decepticon on top of him, pinning him down. His yelp swiftly turned into a muffled scream as Spinner started to peel away his skin, making new incisions here and there, following a mixture of his own course and organic medical knowledge. He wanted to try and keep the organic's hide in one piece if he could. He knew a few people - Cybertronian and alien alike - who would be willing to pay big money for a perfectly good hide of fur. Especially one that hadn't been tampered with too badly.

Blood dribbled to the shattered concrete as the Fox and Decepticon continued on, hidden away from prying eyes of strangers.

### Gygax

Gundog hefted a lump of metal, a twisted piece of shrapnel that Galaxy had walked in. He inspected it closely then cast his scrutinizing gaze toward Solar and Blue Falcon. There was a solid *CLANG* and Solar toppled from his chair with a grunt. Blue Falcon started to laugh harder. Solar groaned and pulled himself back into his seat, rubbing at his head. Gundog snorted a harsh laugh and twisted a smile.

"As I was saying," Gundog said, "don't pick on yer elders. It'll hurt."

"Bleh. You 'ad it commin." Solar muttered, a grin twitching at the corners of his metallic mouth.

"When you three are quite done with annoying each other, I have something you might be interested in hearing." Raid said as he walked into the main control room.

All optics went toward their commander and the room fell silent. Flashpoint walked in behind Raid and stopped short of his station. He eyed up the fresh dent in Solar's golden helm. Solar pointed at Gundog who in return folded his arms across his chest, taking on a slightly more defensive posture.

"He started it." He muttered derisively.

Galaxy then looked up from her post.

"True that." She said bluntly.

Both Raid and Flashpoint gave her an odd look. Galaxy shrugged as best she could in her heavy armour, emitting a slight clanking noise as she did so.

"What? I ain't no rookie-sitter." She said somewhat defensively.

"Who you callin' a rookie, woman?" Gundog snapped playfully.

Galaxy twisted a smile, leaned back in her chair and flexed her knuckles, gaining a few metallic snaps and pops as she did so. She opened her mouth to reply to Gundog's retort with her own, but Raid cut her off.

"If you can continue this daily exchange of insults later, I would greatly appreciate it. Afterall, we do still have to perform our bit for the Autobot cause. This war won't win itself, y'know." Raid said flatly.

Deadmetal and Speeder hurried into the room and took up their workstations, turning to face Raid. The large mech looked around the control room. All his crewmen were in place and at their stations, listening intently to what he was saying.

He held the pause a moment longer before continuing.

"In the past few hours, I've recieved some new data. This new intelligence came directly from the top informing us that a squad of Decepticons intends on seizing the Gygax Energy Depot."

"Which squad? Any idea?" Deadmetal asked.

"Krusher's. Or at least, what's left of it. Apparently Turbulance has left for pastures new and your sister," He said, re-directing his gaze toward Solar, "has gone back to her own unit."

Solar sagged slightly in his chair and grumbled something to himself.

"And he intends on doing this without an entire crew compliment?" Galaxy snorted. "That's pure idiocy."

"I smell an easy target." Gundog sneered from his corner.

"Unless he's got back-up from another unit." Speeder pointed out.

"There was no mention of that, but it's a possibility." Raid said.

"So I take it that we're the mugs who're gonna go and make sure he doesn't take our precious little depot?" Blue Falcon asked, hopefulness edging his voice.

Raid dipped his chin in acknowledgment.

"Yes. We're the only unit that's between him and the depot. There will be another unit waiting at the depot, just in-case, though." He said wryly.

"That's reassuring." Speeder muttered with a light-hearted roll of his optics. "Who's gonna be heading the depot guard's back-up?"

"Not entirely sure. I know Ironhide's in the area, as is Cliffjumper and Juggernaut. But I don't know their exact locations, so it could be either one of their units." Raid replied evenly.

"Well, whichever one of them it is, the depot's definately in good hands." Deadmetal grinned cruelly.

"Hopefully they'll only have to worry about Krusher and nothing more." Flashpoint said.

"Aye. I don't intend on letting any of them off light." Deadmetal said.

"Like you ever do?" Flashpoint smiled.

"I wonder how much they'd fetch for scrap..." Galaxy wondered outloud, leabning back thoughtfully in

her chair.

Raid shook his head, a small smile tilting the corners of his mouth.

"Asides from helping to protect the depot, I'm hoping we can re-take the Trading Post that he's holed up in." Raid added.

They all looked thoughtful for a moment.

"With that back in Autobot control, we can start getting more supplies through to the other Autobot bases around here." Solar said after a moment.

"Exactly. I, personally, think that the Decepticons have overstayed their welcome there. And it's about time we gave them a helping hand in vacating the premises." The tank said with a grin.

"When do we start?" Blue Falcon asked cheerfully.

"Tomorrow: First thing. But just in case he brings his schedule forward, I want two scouts securing the main routes."

He pointed at Deadmetal and Solar.

"Dee, you'll be covering the main road. Solar, I want you keeping an optic on the Narrows. I want immediate reports of *any* activity going on over there, understood? I'll send Blue Falcon and Speeder to relieve you of your shift, so you get a chance to rest-up."

Both Autobots pulled themselves up from their seats and made for the exit.

### Ankmor

Jetstream landed gingerly in the main yard. Debris and shrapnel scrunched and squeaked metallicly under foot as she took a few steps forward. She paused a moment, curiously looking at the remains of the main entrance to the base.

"What in the name of Primus...?" She mumbled and stepped through the gaping threshold.

Her powerful optics picked out the outlines and shapes of the main foyer of the old trading post. She spotted a trail of dried Energon dribbling across the floor, disappearing into the shadows of the adjoining hallway.

She heard a slight shuffling and she carefully approached the location of the noise. She rounded a corner and found Hookshot staggering awkwardly out of the medi-bay, his armour heavily dented, scarred and even hanging off his body in some places, revealing some of the more sensitive circuitry and weaker metal plating beneath.

"Hookshot? What the slag happened?!" She asked rushing toward him.

She tried to help the large Constructicon to stay upright, but he was far too heavy for her and so he ended up sliding down the wall to sit on his ankles.

"Autobots." He said bluntly, voice edged with static. "They raided the base. Made off with the remaining Space Bridge components."

"You're lucky to still be online..." She said, scrutinizing his wounds.

Hookshot nodded numbly.

"Roadtrain rescued me. Hauled me into the medi-bay before I went offline." He said blankly.

Jetstream shook her head.

"What about Krusher?" She said after a moment.

"No idea." Hookshot mumbled. "I didn't see Galaxy with the others."

Jetstream made an odd noise somewhere deep within her vocal processors and looked down the corridor. The lights flickered at the end, poorly illuminating the gaping hole of the doorway that once

stood there. Beyond was the main control room. There was a dim, blue light. Only a few of the computers had come back online and were fully functioning. She looked back to Hookshot, who was staring blankly at the wall behind her.

"I'll be back in a minute." She said softly and made her way towards the main control room.

She navigated the chunks of debris and stepped awkwardly into the devastated room. Computers were sparking and the moonlight was seeping in through the gaping hole in the domed roof. Jetstream looked around, inspecting the damage. There was no sign of Krusher. Then something solid slammed into the side of her head. The sudden, unexpected impact sent her reeling. She lost balance and fell hard on her aft. There was a horrible buzzing in her head and her vision had suddenly become full of multi-coloured static.

"Welcome back, Jetstream." Rumbled a familiar voice. "Or whatever your true designation is." It added sourly.

"Ungh... Whut?" She put a hand to her head and fingered the dent there. "Krusher...?"

A large hand came down and thick fingers wrapped around her neck, squeezing hard and hefting her to her feet. Krusher slammed her against the remains of a computer station, gaining an odd squeaking noise of surprise from her. He held her firm as she wriggled in protest against his actions.

"What're you *doing*?!" She hissed.

"Trying to get to the bottom of this little mystery." He said calmly.

"What mystery?"

"The mystery about where you scurry off to to do your *reporting*." He said gruffly.

"I already told you. I have to go to central command. Megatron's orders. Now let me go!"

"Oh, I don't think so." Krusher said smoothly. "Y'see, once the computers came back online, I made a little call. Naturally, I didn't manage to get through directly to the boss himself. But I did manage to have a word with his second-in-command. And, according to Starscream, there is no record of a Decepticon called Jetstream. Or at least, a living one, anyway."

Jetstream snorted dismissively. Krusher's grip tightened.

"If you believe Starscream, then you'll believe anything." She wheezed angrily.

Krusher growled.

"True; I don't believe a word he says. But the information on the Decepticon Jetstream that he sent me was no lie."

He then proceeded to hurl her across the room. She landed hard, sparks flitting upward and outward as she rolled and bounced across the shattered floor, to come to an abrupt stop via one of the computer set-ups.

"Jetstream has been offline since the start of the war! She had an unfortunate run-in with the Autobot guardian Omega Supreme whilst on a scouting mission to Iacon!" He roared and stomped toward her.

"Who are you?!"

Jetstream looked up at him. Her deep red vizore had become fractured, making it difficult to see straight.

"I'm not a *spy*!" She hissed angrily.

Krusher administered a hard kick to her abdominal plating.

"And how much information have you passed on to the enemy?"

"None of your slugging business!" She snapped.

Krusher brought one of his secondary weapons online. He opened fire. A single shot slammed into her chest armour. The heat seared the silvery sheen, leaving it blackened and buckled. He shot at the same area again, putting a hole through her armour. The circuits beneath fizzed and hissed. The edge of the wound smoked as Energon dribbled down her front.

"Sir-! ... Oh..." Roadtrain said as he and Steele entered the room.

Krusher looked over his shoulder at them, red optics aflame with anger. He then looked back down at the doppelganger. He went into a crouch and pried her vizor off, discarding it to one side. He twisted a smile.

"Ah. There. You're most definitely an Autobot." He said in a dangerous tone.

Her blue optics flickered. Those two shots were hideously close to her Spark chamber and had rendered her left side pretty much inoperable.

"Steele, fetch me a chain to secure the prisoner with. We have another job to do." He said.

Steele hurried off and vanished into a side room. Roadtrain slowly approached Krusher's position. The large mech slowly looked up at him.

"You're a valued member of this team, Roadtrain." He said earnestly. "I'll make sure you're greatly rewarded for your discovery."

For once in a very long time, Roadtrain found himself without a reply. Instead, he cast a dismissive glare down at the Jetstream clone, who in turn averted her gaze elsewhere.

"These do?" Steele asked as he hurried over, thick chains clanking and dragging around his ankles as he fought to stay upright amongst the debris.

"They'll do perfectly." Krusher said and took hold of the chains.

He wrapped them around the femme tightly, her armour buckling with a metallic groan under the tension. He hefted a thick piece of twisted girder and rammed it hard into the ground, tying the chains to it, securing his captive firmly.

"I don't think you'll be going anywhere for a while." He said and turned to his meagre crew. "We have work to do. Crash is bringing some help."

That was all he said. Steele and Roadtrain nodded in acknowledgement and followed him from the room. The Autobot wriggled, but to no avail. She tried sending a transmission. But the knock to the head had badly disrupted all her attempts to do so. All she could do was sit and wait for the outcome of the coming battle and hope that the Autobots prevailed.

## 11 - Prepare For Battle

### Gygax

Speeder looked on, across the wasteland of twisted and charred metal. His gaze had momentarily strayed from the small, winding road better known as the Narrows, and had come to rest upon the twisted remains of an old war machine. It had been built by the Autobots several hundred years ago and become a bit of a landmark via the fact that no one had bothered to remove it and recycle its components. It was a testament to the war; a warning that the enemy were called Decepticons for a reason. It had been an Autobot traitor who had been the demise of the massive tank-like machine. It was onboard that very machine that he'd met Flashpoint. Five out of the eight operators had been killed. Himself, Flashpoint and the traitor being the only survivors. And that was by a minor miracle. His attention was returned back to the present by the low, familiar *whump - whump - whump* of large rotar blades. He turned and signalled Blue Falcon who was perched atop the twisted ruins of a building keeping watch on the main through-road.

*"Sounds like we got company."* He transmitted to the younger Autobot.

*"Yeah, I see 'im. Krusher and Roadtrain."* Blue Falcon replied.

*"Speeder to Raid, y'there boss? We got Decepticon activity on the main road-"* He cast a look at the Narrows and saw Steele trundling carefully through the mess. *"And in the Narrows, too. No sign of Hookshot or Jetstream. Permission to intercept?"*

*"Permission denied. Follow at a safe distance and stick to cover. We're on our way."* Came the gruff reply.

Raid then signed off and left Speeder and Blue Falcon alone. The two could see each other clearly from their vantage points and dearly hoped that Krusher and the other two Decepticons hadn't picked them up with their scanning systems.

*"Right, you heard the boss. Let's be off then."* Speeder transmitted.

He saw the Autobot nod once and half slide, half scramble from his vantage point, back down to the ground. Speeder followed suit. He proceeded to follow on foot, rather than engage his vehicle mode. If he went into vehicle mode, then he feared that his main programming might kick in and un-intentionally send him at a quicker pace than he wanted. It was a bad habit that he retained from his days of being a courier. He noted that Blue Falcon had also chosen to do the same as he saw him, out of the corner of his vision, climb deftly over a pile of twisted metal and disappear into the wreckages that lined the main road. Speeder looked at his own options for cover. There wasn't much. It was fairly open, with only a smattering of ruins. He huffed, a wisp of steam curling from what passed off as his mouth. The sun had risen and was quickly heating up the land. He felt a slight shudder deep within his systems as his cooling systems came online. He rocked back and forth momentarily on his heels, listening to the sound of Steele's metallic treads grating across the metallic surface of Cybertron. The Constructicon wasn't exactly quick in vehicle mode, so he had a few moments to spare. On the other hand, Roadtrain and Krusher didn't have the weight of construction to bear nor the awkwardness of caterpillars. He bounced once and with a barely audible click, his rear wheels spun down from their places at his lower legs and repositioned themselves, his feet reforming around them. He gave an experimental rolling of his feet and, once satisfied that everything was in working order, he skated forward nimbly as if he was taking a leisurely stroll around the block. Skating was quicker than running, but not as quick as driving. It also

used less energy.

He skated across to a felled pylon and ducked down behind it. He peeked over the top and saw Steele trundling along at a steady pace.

*"How's things your end?"* He transmitted.

*"Not good. Krusher and Roadtrain are moving quick. I'm having a hard time keeping up with them amongst the ruins."* He replied moodily.

*"Well you need to keep it up until we hear from Raid or the others."* Speeder replied.

He wasn't too impressed with being told to hang back either. It was only Steele, after all. Yes, Steele was slightly larger and stronger than Speeder, but Speeder had better agility and speed. He also reckoned that he had slightly better weapons than the battered Constructicon, too. He scanned the area for his next form of cover. He located the toppled eaves of a shattered building, took one last scan and skated swiftly towards it, hopping and swerving around anything that got in his way. As he closed the gap between himself and his intended area of cover, the ground behind him erupted in splinters of metal and shrapnel. Speeder swore and skated a tight circle to face the Constructicon, his own weapons online and hot. He took aim at Steele, who was in turn reverting to his robot mode and preparing to continue firing at him. Speeder let off a few plasma shots as two missiles left Steele's shoulder cannon in a puff of grey smoke and yellow flame. Speeder scooted out of the way and ducked down inside the eaves he was originally targeting, the shockwaves of the impacts nearly knocking him over.

*"I've been made!"* He transmitted to all of his crewmates. *"I'm gonna take Steele down now before Krusher realises what's going on!"*

He made the transmission as he shot forward, hunkered low. He bounded over a large ripple in the road that had been caused by the shockwaves of a large bomb and landed a few feet away from Steele. The constructicon growled and swung around, digger arm flicking out and taking the Autobot by surprise. The blow sent Speeder rolling across the narrow road, a felled pylon halting his movements rather abruptly. There was a deep dent in his chest armour and his shoulder joint sparked as he moved his left arm.

He pulled himself to his wheels with a mild grimace and skated forward, circling Steele, taking well aimed shots at the seams between his armour and his joints. Steele howled in anger as an EMP burst washed over his right leg. He instinctively placed all his weight on his left leg and swung a fist at Speeder. Speeder ducked, but was again caught out by the digger arm attached to Steele's back. Steele chuckled grimly as he was lifted up and over the Constructicon's head via the heavily abused bucket and slammed down with all the force Steele could muster into the ground. Speeder's systems fizzed around the edges and he struggled to focus for a moment, but he continued to move. Pain was starting to register, but it was dull and bearable. He forced himself to roll upright, and instead of circling around Steele, like he usually did, he snarled and sprang straight at him, tackling the Constructicon to the ground, sending sparks flying as they landed heavily. Speeder pulled his fist back, metal plating forming around it before punching him square in the jaw with all his strength. There was the nasty little noise of metal tearing underscoring the sound of metal colliding with metal. Steele's jaw hung loose, showing glimpses of his mechanical esophagus. Just within sight, was his vocal processor, an intricate mess of wires and thin, metal plating, overlapping and meshing together. The wires glowed slightly and fizzed, causing the impossibly thin, circuit lined metal plates to vibrate with garbled static.

*"What was that? I couldn't understand a slagging thing you just said."* Speeder grinned cruelly.

The neatly interlocking metal plating that made up the mech's face contorted into a grimace as Speeder punched him again, putting a dent in his thick chest armour.

*"Speeder, report!"* Came Raid's voice.

*"Can't talk now, busy reducing Steele to scrap!"* Was the hurried reply as Speeder was flipped over and promptly kicked down the road.

Steele was slowly starting to regain feeling in his leg.

Speeder landed hard and looked up just in time to see Steele pull himself to his feet, hatred burning in his optics. His jaw was swinging from the movement, sparks and Energon dribbling from the single hinge it was clinging to. Steele took a step forward and unleashed the last of his missiles upon Speeder. The first one was easily avoided, but the second hit the smaller mech square in the chest. The impact sent him rolling further down the road. Now pain really was registering. His circuits were buzzing horribly and the hole in his chest that the missile had made felt as if it was on fire.

Speeder retaliated swiftly, ignoring the fresh pain. He bombarded the ever encroaching Steele with plasma shots and EMP bursts. Steele emitted a low, electronic growl and continued to move forward through the frenzied fire, ignoring the pain that accompanied each shot as pieces of armour started to come loose and fall away. He didn't realise how close Steele was until his hand had gripped him around the neck and squeezed hard enough to send sparks flying from the Autobot's mouth in a puff of steam. His free hand shot up and gripped one of Speeder's flailing hands. He took ahold of his wrist and squeezed until the metal buckled and Speeder emitted something akin to a whimper of pain. Steele hefted Speeder off the ground. There was a surge of hot pain in his left side as his arm was pulled free. Steele snorted and tossed the limb amongst the debris.

*"If I'm going down, then you're coming with me."* Steele transmitted harshly.

Speeder gurgled metallically as he spotted the single remaining missile locked in place at the Constructicon's shoulder.

*"'olonasec, you're not really gonna-"* Speeder started urgently, his sentence swiftly draining away at what he next witnessed.

Steele brought his hand up and ripped his jaw the rest of the way off. He held it before Speeder's face and crushed it in his hand before letting it fall, twisted and broken to the ground. Steele's optics flickered. Speeder looked at him curiously. Then the missile at his shoulder shuddered. Speeder took up his squirming again, but Steele refused to let go, his grip too tough to break out of.

*"Ooohhh Fuuu-"*

The explosion was heard a league away. Krusher ignored it. He always kept an open line to all his crewmen during the course of battle so he could tell who was still online and who wasn't. Steele's line had abruptly cut itself off and his ID signature had vanished suddenly from his long-distance scan.

*"Krusher to Crash. I've just lost Steele."* He transmitted flatly.

*"You have a terrible knack for losing your crew, Krusher."* Came the blunt reply. *"But so long as you take better care of mine than yours during this battle, then all will be well. Try not to screw it up. Megatron's relying on us."*

Burnout followed Crash from above, keeping a close eye on him. Flare and Turbulance followed closely behind in formation. It was time to prove their worth to their new commander and help take the Energon Depot.

*"Krusher has a Decepticon down."* Crash transmitted.

*"Which one?"* Turbulance asked earnestly.

*"Steele."* Was the blunt reply.

Turbulance gave a soft growl that was barely audible over the wind and engine noise. He felt Flare look at him, but he ignored it. He had to admit, that he'd become quite attached to the little Constructicon over

the years. Steele was probably the only mech Turbulance had ever called 'friend' in his entire existence. Loss was an alien feeling to him. It felt unnatural and unwelcome. It didn't belong within his personality traits. Yet he felt a small amount of it, a small hint of sorrow about the news.

*"We're comming up on Krusher's unit."* Burnout said.

*"I can see the Autobots."* Flare said.

*"I don't see Galaxy...."* Turbulance said.

*"Thank Primus for that."* Flare muttered.

Turbulance grinned in the privacy of his vehicle mode.

*"Decepticons, prepare to intercept and engage the enemy!"* Crash barked with a cruel eagerness.

## 12 - Intimidation

### Gygax

Crash powered along the battle scarred road, deftly avoiding any debris that lay in his path. Up ahead, the battle had already started. Just moments ago, he'd received word from Flare that the Autobots had cut Roadtrain off and that Krusher had gone in for the kill, if not to back-up the weaker Decepticon. He skidded around a sharp corner, alien tyres squeeling in protest and leaving a set of black streaks on the odd metallic road in his wake. Up ahead, there was the remains of a bridge. In the basin beneath that bridge was where things were happening. In previous years, the bridge had been bombed, leaving it as a twisted, half-wreckage, the rest of its remains laying crumpled and shattered below. The din of battle raised itself above the noise of his engine and a chopper soared into view, firing hot yellow into the skirmish below. Crash picked up his pace, watching the Autobot carefully, taking in all his movements. Crash launched himself off the twisted remains of the bridge as his panels and wheels reconfigured themselves, re-forming around the bipedal body that was concealed within. A cannon formed around his left forearm. A heavy, charged plasma shot erupted forth, momentarily knocking him off balance mid-air and sending him into a slow spinning motion as he plummeted towards the ground. He caught a glimpse of the damage he'd done. The tail boom of the chopper was ripped apart, pieces of fractured and charred metal splintering away in a blast of liquid fire. Gundog howled his rage and tried to control his sudden descent, his shots streaking around, hitting everything that got within his crosshairs. Crash landed heavily amongst the debris, but rolled neatly to his feet and ran for cover, firing at any Autobot that came within range. Gundog also hit the ground hard, but failed to recover so easily. Instead he transformed and had a quick inspection of his damage. He swore; the remains of his legs sparking at the knees, Energon dribbling out and pooling beneath the fresh, smoking stubs of metal.

From somewhere behind him, Flashpoint hurried into the fight, wielding his own gun. Blue Falcon was hot at his heels, shooting at Turbulance who was circling overhead like a predatory bird. A large hand landed heavily on the back of Gundog's neck armour, hauling him towards cover. He grunted at the sudden movement, yet continued shooting. Crash ducked down behind a piece of twisted roadway as the Autobot's shots seared across the distance, slamming into the chunk of bridge as he was hauled into cover. Flashpoint grunted something as he set about sealing up the wounds.

"You're lucky it's only your legs." He muttered. "You'll have to make do with being legless until we get back to base."

"I'm used to being legless!" Gundog snorted in a sudden burst of amusement.

Flashpoint looked momentarily bewildered at the comment then shook his head, twisting a wry smile.

"Stay put!" Flashpoint ordered sternly. "You're in no state to fight."

"Not a chance!" Gundog retorted hotly, his temper suddenly returning. "So long as I'm still functioning, I'll be fighting!"

Overhead, Burnout opened his cargo bay doors. Several dark figures dropped into the sky, plummeting toward the battle. Shortly after disembarking their mode of transport, Burnout followed suit, transforming mid-flight and going into a controlled free-fall, twin sets of rotar blades flared out at his back. Several sets of metallic feet landed heavily and joined the fight. Plasma, laser and EMP fire filled the basin.

Deadmetal took up Gundog's position as the air support, firing all his weapons upon the Decepticon soldiers below. He stayed just out of lethal range, putting gravity on his side. Anything that hit him merely left hot streaks of black and minor dents on his armour as the enemy shots lost their upward momentum, whilst his own firepower slammed into the ground below with ferocity. It was hard to aim from his current height, but he still managed to do damage, seeing limbs ripped apart in a flurry of sparks and smoke. Several of his shots hit home, reducing the Decepticons to smouldering piles of scrap. At the edge of the basin, Raid was exchanging close blows with Krusher, the larger mech bearing down on Raid whenever he got the chance.

"Why don't you give up now and save yourself the humiliation of a horrible defeat?" Krusher rumbled bitterly as he grappled with Raid.

"If I do that, then I won't get the pleasure of seeing you reduced to scrap." Raid growled.

The smaller mech hooked his foot around Krusher's ankle and heaved him over. Both Autobot and Decepticon landed heavily, exchanging heavy blows and close-range gunfire. A piece of Raid's thick armour flew free and he hissed electronically as the plasma burst seared the sensitive circuitry and metal plating beneath. He managed to get a fist free and the resulting punch in the face made Krusher reel and his optics dim momentarily. The Decepticon's optics buzzed with static then he felt his world topple as he was forced to roll off of his quarry. Raid got his feet. A nearby Decepticon exploded in a flurry of shrapnel and liquid fire. Raid cast a quick look in that direction in time to see Solar circle low and cut down another Decepticon with near-perfect aim.

### Gygax - Autobot Base

The base was dark and nothing within was moving, save for the slow blinking of several tell-tales on the numerous computers. Shrapnel fiddled with the next control panel, inputting codes and swearing when they didn't work. Finally, the blast door slid open. Shrapnel made an odd, relieved noise in the back of his vocal processors. Within the newly opened room was a single green light. Four sets of red optics peered into the darkness, picking out the various pieces of machinery and the lone computer set-up against the far wall, next to yet another heavily armoured door. Shrapnel stepped carefully in to the room, scanning the area constantly for any traps and hidden security mechanisms. He padded slowly across the room and hacked into the computer. The screen flickered to life and a green, wire-frame map of the entire base was displayed. Several moments passed in utter silence. Then a head appeared at his shoulder, inquisitive optics staring at the monitor.

"Found it yet?" Lokjaw whispered.

"No." Shrapnel grunted simply.

"Try the top floor." Wrench suggested helpfully, appearing at Shrapnel's other shoulder.

"We *are* on the top floor." Sideblast said as he too inspected the map from over the top of Shrapnel's head.

The four young Constructicons continued to stare intensely at the flickering screen.

*Something's wrong...* Shrapnel thought. *It's been too easy... Something bad's gonna happen, I just know it.*

The very same thought weighed on his friends equally as heavy. So far, they'd had very little problems with breaking into the Autobot's base.

"There!" Sideblast hissed excitedly, jabbing a dark purple finger at the monitor. "That room there. It's big enough to house a fully functioning Space Bridge. It's gotta be in there!"

"You sure...?" Wrench asked hesitantly.

"Yep. Biggest room here. Takes up both levels. Gotta be that one." Sideblast said.

"Well, we ain't got much to lose..." Shrapnel sighed.

"Except our Sparks if we don't find it and sabotage it." Lokjaw said pointedly.

"Thanks. I *really* needed to be reminded of that." Shrapnel hissed irritably and set about opening the door.

When the door slid open they followed their memorized route to the room they'd espied on the computer screen.

"Well, *slag*." Wrench muttered. "How're we gonna get in there?"

Shrapnel inspected the door frame and the door itself.

"There's no control panel..." He murmured.

"No slag. We can see that, genius." Lokjaw commented sourly and crossed his spindly arms across his armoured chest.

"Knew it'd been too easy..." Shrapnel added quietly. "Had to be some kind of draw back..."

"I say we use brute force and ignorance." Sideblast grunted.

The others looked at him and edged away from the door. Sideblast grinned and brought his weapons to bear, the door within his crosshairs. There was an explosion of laser and plasma. The door became blacked and hot, but remained sturdy.

"Nice idea, Sergeant Subtle." Shrapnel said.

"Shut up. This is a tough door. We need to do this together." Sideblast snapped. "C'mon, otherwise it'll be a long and painful death."

"Yeeeeaaahhh... I much prefer the swift and painful death at the hands of the Autobots, rather than the long and painful one." Wrench said and took up his position next to Sideblast.

Shrapnel and Lokjaw followed, the four Constructicons forming a semi-circle around the thick blast door. All brought their weapons online and this time the door caved in, twisting into the room, melting slightly around the edges where the brunt of the blast had hit it.

"Piece of Energon cake." Sideblast grunted with a slight smile.

He proceeded to step forward, stamping the door the rest of the way to floor, ripping it completely from its frame with a whine of buckling metal. Inside stood the large silhouette of the Space Bridge.

"Told you it'd be in this room." He said with a hint of triumph.

"Wait." Shrapnel said, putting a hand on Sideblast's arm to halt him from moving any further into the room.

Sideblast didn't protest. Instead he merely held his position, freezing in place, one foot inches from the ground, held in mid-step. Shrapnel shook his head dismissively.

"No. No one here. The mix of electrical signatures from the Bridge just confused my senses, is all." He said.

"Good. Maybe now we can get a move on. This place is giving me the creeps."

"Yeah. I feel like I'm being watched." Wrench said nervously as they ventured further into the room.

They stood at the foot of the Space Bridge, looking up at it.

"Y'know, up until now, I've never actually seen one of these things up close..." Lokjaw mumbled in awe. He reached out and placed a hand gently on the wall of the Bridge's basin.

"Shame we gotta sabotage it to the point of beyond repair." Shrapnel said.

"Eh, orders are orders. You wanna go against Megatron, that's fine with me." Sideblast said with a shrug.

Shrapnel approached the computer that was embedded into the wall of the basin and set about hacking it.

"C'mon, let's wreck this thing." Wrench said.

The lights then came on. All Constructicons whirled, weapons at hand. Then their gazes travelled upwards until they locked with the blue vizer clad gaze of the large Autobot that towered over them.

"Oh, don't mind little ol' me." Galaxy rumbled sweetly. "Please, by all means, continue. I wouldn't want to interrupt your special little task."

The smile she presented them unnerved them more than her mass did. Several shots of plasma and laser pounded into her thick deep green and fiery orange armour, leaving nothing but tiny pock-marks and black scuffs. Several of the small dents promptly popped themselves back out. Galaxy rubbed a thumb across a scorch mark, rubbing the sudden accumulation of soot from that particular area to reveal the green paintwork beneath. She then looked back down at the Constructicons. She twisted another smile, but this time it wasn't at all pleasant.

"My turn." She sneered.

She brought all her weaponry to bear, her cannons and missile pods whirring and humming intently as she trained them on the young Constructicons.

"OH MY GOD!" Wrench screamed in dismay at the display of firepower.

"PRIMUS HAVE MERCY ON US ALL!" Lokjaw countered in horror.

"Right now, I really don't think that it's Primus you should be begging to!" She snapped angrily. "Get away from that Bridge *NOW!*"

All four scabbled forward, away from the Space Bridge.

"Now you will tell me exactly what it is you're here to do." She growled, keeping her weapons hot.

"We've been sent to sabotage the Space Bridge. That's it, I swear!" Shrapnel whined desperately.

"Please don't kill us! We'll do anything! Just don't eat us!" Sideblast pleaded.

Galaxy Hmmed, tilting her head to one side slightly as if thinking hard about something. The order came almost immediately.

"On your knees and grovel for me, slag-heaps!" She roared.

Four sets of knees of varying sizes hit the ground simultaneously. Numerous pleas filled the room.

Galaxy watched the display intently for a few minutes, a content smile on her dark, mechanical features.

"You're slaggin' right you ain't worthy!" She rumbled. "Now gimme one real good reason why I shouldn't just reduce you lot to smouldering heaps of scrap right this instant."

"Uhm....!" Shrapnel looked around at his cohorts wildly. "Uh-!"

"We're hard workers!" Wrench offered desperately.

"I'm willing to change sides!" Lokjaw blurted.

"We're real good at building things!" Sideblast added enthusiastically.

"*Real* good!" Shrapnel agreed with a brisk nod. "So please don't kill us!" He added in a small voice.

Galaxy eyed them all up.

"You're young and naive." She said simply. "One wrong move, and you're Hoven Toast, got it?"

They all nodded briskly.

## 13 - Galaxy's Minions

### Gygax

Galaxy loomed over the four Constructicons as they busied themselves with repairing the busted blast door. She watched them carefully and wore a small, contented smile on her mechanical features as they worked frantically, but efficiently enough to set right that which they had ruined.

*"Galaxy to Raid, come in." She transmitted. "I've caught the intruders and I'm now putting them through their paces. Care for any back-up down there?"*

She waited for the reply almost impatiently whilst watching a brief squabble between the young Constructicons. Lokjaw cast a careful look over an armoured shoulder, made an odd eeping noise and swore at his friends to get on with their task, lest they feel the large female's wrath.

*"If the intruders are secure, back-up would be extremely good right now! We're outnumbered down here and I have a soldier down!"*

The reply was riddled with static and she swore she caught the tail-end of an explosion before she was cut-off. She glared down at the Constructicons.

"Finished?" She rumbled.

Four metallic faces peered up at her nervously. Each one gave a numb nod.

"We've fixed the door, sir." Shrapnel said obediently.

"Next orders?" Wrench asked, trying to avoid being crushed.

Galaxy smiled intently. She had their full attention. It was now time to make full use of their still developing processors.

"How much experience have you had with combat?" She asked gruffly.

Looks were exchanged and there was a chorus of low, meek mumbblings.

"Uh, not much..." Shrapnel said slowly.

"I've been in combat once. But that was a year ago, back in Tyger Pax." Lokjaw admitted.

"Other than that, you've never been in a serious combat situation?" She asked.

"Not really... I mean, we've had the training, but only Lokjaw's had a chance to put it into practice." Sideblast replied.

"Well today's your lucky day, kiddies." She beamed. "Because you're gonna prove to me that you're Autobots, not Decepticons!"

There was a moment's pause as what she just said unfolded properly in their minds.

"You mean, you're gonna make us fight...?" Wrench hazarded slowly.

"We're not gonna have to fight you, are we?" Lokjaw asked a touch nervously.

Galaxy resisted the urge to smack him upside the head.

"No." She sighed. "Your new boss and comrades need back-up, so look sharp and get to the landing strip!" She ordered.

She walked across to a small computer and entered a few codes. A tiny vent in the ceiling slid open and hundreds of tiny red optics flickered into life. There was a barely audible buzzing emanating from the darkness of the vent. Then hundreds of tiny silver and black bodies fluttered in to the room. The four Constructicons hesitated as they watched the entire hive of Insecticons flood the room, then fled from Galaxy as she ushered them menacingly down the maze of large corridors and out on to the runway

that was situated directly next to the main building. The landing lights that ran the length of either side of the runway were dark, some even broken and shattered from past skirmishes and the markings on the landing strip were worn, near invisible. Shrapnel turned and looked up at Galaxy.

"What were *those*?!" He blurted, the buzzing still taunting the edges of his hearing.

"Insecticons." She replied simply. "They make sure that no Decepticon breaks in."

"How? They're *tiny*!" Wrench said, bewildered.

Galaxy twisted a cruel smile.

"They eat any intruders alive. It's proven very effective in the past." She grinned cruelly.

The four Constructicons went momentarily silent as they contemplated the sudden influx of mental imagery that flooded their processors.

"And if you go against me, then you'll be their next meal!" She rumbled. "Now stay put while I get changed!"

She walked into the middle of the runway and hunkered down as her armour bent, re-forming itself as her body untangled and stretched. The four young Constructicons looked on, awaiting for further orders. Neither dared move. It only required a few seconds for Galaxy to arrange her vehicle mode, sizing up the four Constructicons and adjusting herself to accommodate them and herself comfortably. A hole slid open in the side of her hull with an audible set of metallic clicks as metal plating folded apart.

"All aboard!" Her voice boomed from somewhere within the depths of the newly formed space shuttle.

The Constructicons exchanged a brief array of glances before hurrying to carry out the order. They gingerly climbed inside, looking at the interior with curiosity. They'd been on troop transports several times before, each machine, sentient or otherwise, looking as bland as the next on the inside. Galaxy was no exception. There was a long, metallic bench running along either side of the cramped compartment, and that was about it.

"Well this is cosy." Lokjaw commented quietly.

Sideblast swore when he hit his head on the roof.

"A little more room for the larger of us, or is that too much to ask for?" He grunted, rubbing at the new dent in his rounded helm.

"You only get more space when I ain't in no rush, and right now, I'm in a rush, so shut up, sit down and prepare for take-off!" She growled irritably.

They complied immediately and sat down on the benches, gripping the rails either side of them. There was a low rumbling of engines powering up then a lurch. Seconds later, they felt somewhat weightless for a few moments as she leveled out.

"These are the ones you'll be fighting alongside." She said and transmitted to each of them a picture of each Autobot along with their names and rank.

A simple crew roster, one that wouldn't land them in any hot water if leaked to the enemy.

"Kay, so the big red and green guy's the boss...." Wrench said slowly.

"Man, he looks grumpy." Shrapnel said almost to himself.

Galaxy banked hard and the Constructicons yelped, re-doubling their death grips on the railings they clung to.

"Is it too late to say that I have a *massive* fear of heights!?" Sideblast whined, shuttering his optics momentarily as he caught a glimpse out of the foreport.

The terrain below was coming up fast in a blur of silvers, blacks and greys.

"Yes." Galaxy replied simply.

She leveled out again as she cut a slalom through the twisted peaks of wrecked buildings. She scanned ahead and made an odd grunting noise.

"Hmph. The Decepticons are piling out of the old drainage system." She muttered bitterly. She made another transmission to the four Constructicons. "See these drainage pipes?"

There was a chorus of affirmatives as they looked at the mapped pipe network.

"I need you guys to seal them up. Barricade them with whatever you can and stop those blasted Decepticons from getting to the field of battle! Destroy any that make it out of the pipes. Once you've secured the drainage system, report back to me immediately, otherwise you'll wish you were never protoformed, gottit?!"

"Yessir!" They said in unison.

"Gooooood..." She purred, unnerving them further. "It's time to dis-embark! Good luck kids, you'll need it."

The hull split open beneath their feet and the benches folded away. The railings slid from their grasp and they fell the rest of the way and in to the outskirts of the battle. All four landed heavily, their systems buzzing horribly.

"How very polite..." Sideblast muttered bitterly as he rubbed his skid plate.

"At least you didn't land on your head this time." Wrench grinned and pulled himself upright to survey the scene.

Lokjaw and Shrapnel were already gathering up what debris they could, piling it into the open maw of a large pipe. From behind the piles of freshly arranged twisted chunks of metal came a metallic roar of anger.

"He's trynna get through!" Lokjaw yelped when the make-shift plug shuddered under a heavy blast. Both Constructicons threw themselves on top of the pile of wedged metals, hoping that their weight would add to the deterrent.

"We need more metal!" Shrapnel shouted.

"Wait!" Sideblast said, holding his hands out in front of him as if to stop his two friends from doing anything further. "We're free of that Autobot now, so why are we obeying her orders? We're *Decepticons*, not Autobots!" He pointed out

There was a brief pause between the four of them, the only sounds and movement being that coming from the main basin below the bridge and from within the pipe.

"Uh..." Shrapnel said, mind suddenly going blank.

"I'm staying put. I change sides!" Wrench blurted.

All optics landed on him. He cringed slightly under the mixture of glares, bewilderment and amusement.

"Seriously. I got a good feeling about this." He said cheerfully. "Think about it. Optimus Prime prefers to keep his troops happy and in one piece. Megatron, on the other hand, doesn't give a slag if anyone under his command is horribly mutilated."

"Good point." Shrapnel said with a nod. "I'm staying."

"**Are you insane!?**" Sideblast howled, completely bewildered and horrified. "If any of the Decepticons figure out we're deserters, the bounties that'll be put on our head will be *massive*! MASSIVE I SAY!!" He said flailing his arms to add emphasis.

"Cool! If I fake my own death, will I get the reward money?" Lokjaw pondered outloud.

The Decepticons in the tunnel they'd blocked up had gone silent and moved on. Shrapnel interrupted the ongoing conversation with haste.

"Raise your hand if you're defecting to Prime's side!" He said hurriedly.

Wrench and Lokjaw immediately raised their hands. Sideblast stayed stubborn, but his expression and posture started to falter under the pressure of his friends curious gazes.

"Fine." He sighed and raised his hand.

"Good. Right then. That sorted, let's go seal up those other drainage pipes." Shrapnel said and led them

cautiously off in the direction of the next, closest pipe. They skirted around the edge of the basin and eventually came across the next pipe. Three Decepticons piled out into the open, the mech at the fore jerking backwards at an odd angle as his chest exploded. Shrapnel looked across the ongoing battle, trying to locate the origin of the missile. Hunkered down behind a twisted piece of wreckage in the shadows, he could just make out an Autobot, sniping the Decepticons. He was moving about awkwardly, shuffling from position to position. Shrapnel paired up the Autobot with the the images Galaxy had sent them. He recognised him as Gundog, one of the newer members of Raid's team. Above, an Autobot they recognised as Deadmetal whirled sharply, red hot plasma fire streaking out and slamming into any Decepticon that got in his crosshairs. He released a cluster of missiles and the ground around Galaxy's feet exploded in a flurry of shrapnel and liquid fire and enemy components.

She gave a quick nod and pulled the Decepticon from her shoulder before it could do any damage to her neck and face. She tossed the clambering Decepticon into the thick of Autobot fire and it exploded in a cloud of metal and Energon. Galaxy stamped around, reigning hell upon the enemy that got in her way. There was a shout and she spun on the spot, ignoring the enemy ammunition that was biting through her armour. Krusher was fighting Raid, and was winning. She growled and emptied the remains of her missile pods upon the Decepticon. Krusher howled within the cloud of billowing smoke and fire. Raid stumbled from the fray, joints sparking, Energon dribbling from his chest and side. He cast a look up at Galaxy.

"Go join Gundog. I got this one covered." She rumbled, slamming a balled fist into an open palm. She strode into the clearing smoke. As Raid shambled his way for cover, he heard Krusher make an odd yelping sound. Raid ducked down behind a piece of the bridge's wreckage and took a couple of shots at the Decepticons who were still locked in melees with his own team. The Autobot back-up was slowly trickling into the battle, lead by Ironhide who was more intent on mowing down the enemy rather than doling out orders to his team. Raid grunted something to himself and waded back into the fight, laser and plasma shots pounding into his armour. Blue Falcon had been surrounded by the enemy.

"You look like you could use some help." He rumbled, grabbing a Decepticon by the shoulder and heaving him out of the way, shooting his chest out before he landed.

Blue Falcon didn't even bother looking at his commander. He was too busy staving off the relentless melee attacks of five Decepticons. The number was fast reduced when Raid stepped in, something which the young Autobot was grateful for.

*"I'm running out of ammunition and energy!"* Deadmetal transmitted.

*"Same here. I have one more missile left."* Gundog added from his make-shift safe zone.

*"What do you say we end this right now? Let's finish them off!"*

*"Sounds good to me."* Flashpoint transmitted from the opposite side of the basin.

Raid agreed completely with Ironhide. This particular battle had gone on for much too long. They still had a base to recapture.

## 14 - Sniping The Decepticon Way

### Gygax

Flare stared down and into the battle. The skirmish had fast been reduced to an all-out fire-fight, with only the bravest and fool-hardest of the Autobots and Decepticons pressing forward and coming together in hand-to-hand combat amongst the heavy crossfire. She knew she was much too weak to survive such a fight in one piece. She'd thought herself lucky when she came across a felled defence pylon, the turret that was once sat atop its peak still in barely working order. A few crossed wires had been pulled and rearranged and the machine had laborously hummed back into life, yellow lights pulsing gently and lazily up the barrel. She had a death grip on both pistol grips. She looked into the mess below through the yellowed crosshairs. She'd fired a couple of shots into the fight, trying to get the feel for the hulking weapon. She heaved it around on its bent stand. It was heavy and creaking at the joints that allowed it to rotate and adjust position. But it still worked. That's all that matters. She found Burnout. He was surrounded by the Autobot reinforcements and was now struggling to cope. Crash was nowhere to be seen. She couldn't even get a signal through anymore. Turbulance was still swooping and circling above, making the airborne Autobot's targeting a nightmare.

*"Open fire on the Constructicons blocking the pipes."* Turbulance transmitted.

His voice shook her back to reality and everything seemed to speed back up and grow louder. The noise was horrendous; borderline deafening. She swung the turret around, trying to locate the Constructicons in question. She finally located them and watched them pile large chunks of scrap metal into the maw of an over-flow pipe.

*"They're Decepticons, though!"* She transmitted in confusion when she spotted the deep purple insignias on the mechs.

*"They're traitors to the Decepticon cause! They're deserters and need to be taught a lesson; now OPEN FIRE!"* He rumbled irritably and swooped low into the chaos, trailing destruction.

A shudder ran through her systems and a plume of steam escaped her mouth. The day was dragging on and was getting mercilessly hot. *Curse these Cybertronian summers!* She spat bitterly in the back of her mind. A yelp and a curse caught her attention as a familiar voice rose above the din only to be quickly drowned out again. It was all she needed though.

She swung the cannon around and opened fire. She didn't hear Turbulance complain. She was hitting her targeted Autobots, albeit not of the Constructicon variety. Limbs were shredded and a torso exploded in a burst of electricity, metal and Energon. The ion cannon was still going strong. She struck out at another target. The large Autobot howled and collapsed into the throng where it lay jittering and unable to function correctly. She hissed in triumph. Crash now had an open shot, the Autobots she'd been firing at having rapidly and momentarily dispersed from the unexpected volley.

"FLARE!"

"What d'you want?" She growled irritably at the familiar voice that had suddenly made itself present.

"I want you stop this and listen to me-!"

She cast a glare at her brother who hovered near-by, just out of range and sight of the battle. His voice trailed away at her expression, his words fading with his hope.

"Why should I listen to you?" She growled, her grip on the controls tightening.

"Because I'm your brother!" He tried weakly.

"HA!" She snorted. "You're a coward! You abandoned me! YOU LEFT ME TO *DIE!*" She screamed, her voice shaking with anger. "You're no brother of mine."

Those final words came as a dangerously low growl.

"Flare....?"

Solar started to back away cautiously as his sister heaved on the gun, turning it around. The gaping, smoking maw of the barrel was now pointed at him. Something within its depths started to glow. Then realisation hit him full-force and he dived out of the way. Sharp pain registered hotly in his left shoulder and the scent of burnt metal played at the edges of his olfactory sensors. He landed heavily and skittered out of the way of another shot.

"Flare, stop! *Please!*" He pleaded. "I really don't wanna fight you!" He pleaded, trying to ignore the pain. His left arm fell limp and useless. It was a lucky shot that had severed and melted several important wires in the joint.

"Then you'll die without honor! Which is fine by me." She grinned cruelly and took aim once more. Solar leapt deftly into the air, his afterburners flaring. Flare had him in her crosshairs, finger on the trigger. There was a flash of silver. Energon splattered in to the air and Solar jerked, falling back down, landing with a clatter. Flare's finger hovered over the trigger as she looked on in curiosity at her felled brother squirming around on the ground, trying to heave a length of pipe from his chest.

"What...?" She muttered in bemusement.

Then she heard a familiar grumbling. Behind where Solar was fidgeting desperately and cursing, the bulky figure of Roadtrain; battered and scarred, joints sparking and a trail of Energon dribbling steadily from a seam between his abdominal armour rose up and onto the embankment they were stood on. He ignored Flare completely, instead walking up to her brother. Solar froze mid-struggle, a hand clamped firmly around the pipe that was protruding from his chest, slick with vital fluids.

"Slag." Roadtrain growled bitterly. "A few inches out from the Spark..."

A large foot landed heavily on Solar's chest and an equally big hand gripped the sharpened pipe. Roadtrain tore it from the young Autobot's body. He proceeded to add more weight, the armour buckling and groaning under the pressure, as did its wearer. Roadtrain looked up at Flare. He then looked the cannon over before casting a glance at the battle below. There was no sign of Krusher. He dismissed it and looked back to Flare.

"I suggest you ignore the small-rivets," He said, gesturing at her groaning brother, "and turn that thing on the big guys down below."

"Uh..." Flare looked from her brother and out into the battle once more.

Deadmetal and Turbulance had now both gone from the sky, having fell in a tangle of limbs trying to rip each other's heads off.

"Well? What're you waiting for? Megatron to sign a peace treaty?" He cackled and lumbered off back down the embankment and into the fray, wielding his makeshift spear with the determination and ferocity of the damned.

Just on the edge of vision, as she spun the heavy weapon back around to point into the crowd below, she saw her brother stir. He rolled on to his front and pushed himself upright. He stood and swayed on the spot for a moment, watching his sister.

"Why're you doing this?" He asked.

She ignored him and took aim.

"What lies did they spin you?"

She pulled the trigger and an Autobot fell.

"You can't seriously believe that they're the ones who're fighting for peace and justice and that the

Autobots are the evil ones?"

Another Autobot was stricken. Burnout raised a foot and smashed the felled mech's head to pieces. She removed a hand from a pistol grip and pointed the balled fist at her brother. A gun formed atop her forearm.

"Shut up." She growled and fired.

The EMP hit Solar square in the head. His blue optics flickered then went out. He fell to the ground and Flare continued with her high-powered sniping.

"You got an enemy base to capture, right?" Ironhide shouted over the din.

A Decepticon his own size charged him. The old Autobot grabbed his arm and swung him around, forcing the Decepticon to continue on by at an uncontrolled rate. Ironhide chuckled deeply as he caught the Decepticon collide with two more at the edge of his vision, bringing them down in a tangle of alloyed limbs and curses. Raid swung around beside him, bringing a fist up and brutally beating another into submission, before releasing the pain of his primary cannon upon its head. The Decepticon forces were now quickly thinning. They were either being reduced to scrap or were retreating.

"If you think you and your squad can handle this, then I'll gladly take my leave." Raid replied and fired at a fleeing Decepticon.

Ironhide did the same.

"We like challenges." He grinned.

*"Autobot unit 231, re-group and move out! We're taking Krusher's place now!"* Raid transmitted at large to all Autobots, not quite knowing who was who anymore.

*"Constructicons, go with Raid. And for the love of Primus, **Behave** and watch your new teammate's backs!"* Galaxy transmitted. *"I'm staying put, big guy. I currently have Krusher in a whole new world of pain right now."*

Ironhide cast a look at Raid, who shrugged.

"Quite a mech you got yerself, there." He commented and let off several more rounds, watching in glee as the gaggle of fleeing Decepticons scattered.

"That would be a mildly polite way of putting it." Raid replied blankly.

*"Permission to stay sir, on the basis that I can't exactly walk right now!"* Gundog transmitted, a slight humorous tone edging his voice.

*"Do what the hell you want, Gunner, so long as you get back fairly intact and functioning."*

Raid cast a look around, battering a smaller Decepticon from his body as he did so.

"I look forward to readin' your report!" Ironhide grinned wolvisly over his shoulder.

"Don't you always?"

Raid then waded off through the chaos, keeping as low as possible. Just because the battle was thinning, didn't mean that all Decepticons were retreating or dead. He saw Deadmetal rise from a pile of bodies and various other pieces of metallic wreckage. The Autobot looked battered and worn out, but he still held himself high, ready to take on the proverbial hoard.

"Flashpoint?!" Raid shouted.

The medical officer scurried out from his cover, shooting as he moved. He then proceeded to dive back into cover, crouching behind a piece of the twisted bridge that Deadmetal, Gundog and Raid were now hiding behind. Raid cast a look at Gundog's legs. The damaged mech grinned manically.

"Told you the damage ain't that bad!" He said with a smile.

An ion pulse streaked over head.

"Keep an optic on Galaxy. Don't let her leave you behind and don't let any remaining 'Cons sneak attack

her, understood?" Raid said.

"Completely!" Gundog sketched a quick salute, sparks flitting from his elbow joint.

Deadmetal was looking around as was Flashpoint.

"Where's Blue Falcon and Solar?" Flashpoint asked after a moment.

There was a pause then Deadmetal said: "Found Falcon! He's trying his luck with Crash!"

Four sets of Autobot optics peered carefully over the top of the chunk of bridge. Indeed, Blue Falcon was running circles around Crash, but he wasn't getting in enough hits to be of any serious danger to the spikey Decepticon. Crash was skilled and had been one of the first mechs to sign up to the Decepticon cause. He was quite easily fending off the younger Autobot as he fought his way through the hoards of remaining Autobots, seemingly only keeping him around for amusement's sake.

"He's gonna kill him before long." Gundog muttered.

"He's not responding to my transmissions." Deadmetal grunted.

"Nor mine. Headstrong little scrote." Gundog added.

"He's got some skill, I'll give him that. Determination, too. But it's not enough to bring down someone like Crash." Flashpoint said solemnly.

"I'll go get him." Deadmetal sighed. "Stay here and cover me, yeah?"

"Try not to waste too much energy. We still have another objective to tackle yet." Raid said as Deadmetal bounded over their make-shift defense and transformed into vehicle mode.

Small vortexes of fine debris and soot whirled up in his wake as he moved forward, towards Blue Falcon.

"*I'm coming to get you, whether you like it or not!*" Deadmetal growled.

"*Not yet, I've nearly got him!*" Blue Falcon replied, then was promptly swatted away by Crash.

"You irritating little insect!" He growled. "Why don't you just curl up and die like the others?!"

A weapon was brought to bear, Blue Falcon firmly within Crash's crosshairs. A deep green and black Cybertronian helicopter dropped from the sky, a set of thin, un-armoured arms emerging from its hull. Deadmetal heaved Blue Falcon off the ground just as Crash's plasma shot slammed into the ground where his head had been. Crash then toppled backwards with an electronic shriek as liquid fire exploded on his chest armour.

"What're you doing?!" Blue Falcon shouted as he squirmed in Deadmetal's grip.

"We've got more to do and we need more than three mechs to do it! Now *stop fidgeting and behave!*"

Deadmetal growled angrily. "You've already pushed your luck by ignoring a direct order!"

Blue Falcon then stopped squirming. He saw Raid and Flashpoint running from the basin. He also saw Flare manning an old ion cannon and Roadtrain walking grimly into the fray below. Blue Falcon took aim but was halted from pulling the trigger by Deadmetal.

"Take aim on Flare. That cannon can do more damage than Roadtrain can." He said. "And anyway, why in the name of Primus am I carrying you?"

"Uh..."

"Nevermind. Just take out the slaggin' cannon before it takes us out!"

Flare had re-directed her aim at the two Autobots. She pulled the trigger. The shot exploded halfway across the gap. Deadmetal and Blue Falcon wobbled and tilted in the air as the shockwave caused by Blue Falcon's dead-aim hit them. Then they both fired simultaneously. Flare dove from the cannon and swooped away, towards Burnout who was barking orders at any surrounding Decepticons. The cannon exploded, scattering its components across the embankment.

"What a shot!" Blue Falcon said triumphantly, pumping his fist.

"Hey! Watch it!"

"Sorry."

"*We've located Solar.*" Flashpoint transmitted. "*He's damaged but still functioning enough to help. We're now heading back across the boarder to re-take the trading station.*"

"*We're on our way.*" Deadmetal replied. "Car or helicopter, I don't care. Just follow orders this time, understood soldier?"

"Yessir!"

Once over the embankment, Deadmetal came low, releasing his grip on Blue Falcon. He tucked his arms back into his hull as the younger Autobot rolled deftly across the ground, shrouding himself with his vehicle mode as he did so. They both raced to catch up with the others, leaving Galaxy and her Constructicons behind to help Ironhide clean up.

## 15 - Broken

### Ankmor

Hookshot stared, red optics focused on a point beyond the Autobot's head. She'd tried reasoning with the Constructicon, but appealing to his better side had failed completely.

"Maybe so, if you were a Decepticon and Krusher was having one of his random hissy fits." Hookshot had said, his voice flat and uncaring.

The Autobot formerly known as the Decepticon Jetstream wriggled fruitlessly against her heavy bonds once again, and once again, to no avail. Her energy levels were running dangerously low, but at least the flow of escaping Energon had been stemmed.

"If you help me get out of these," she had said, fidgeting to indicate the thick chains and the old support girder she was bound to, "I could see about-"

"No." He'd said flatly, cutting her off mid-bribe.

Then his optics found hers and locked in. He held her gaze for a moment.

"You stole a dead mech's identity. I may be considered one of many evils nowadays, but even I think that's wrong. You can't steal a good, hardworking mech's identity once they've keeled over no matter what faction they were. It's not right. Even I know that." He rumbled bitterly.

He then went silent, his gaze sliding elsewhere. His processor throbbed and buzzed, and his body was still having a hard time recovering. He put a large, purple alloyed hand flat on the floor, his metallic expression rearranging itself into one of mild puzzlement. The ground was vibrating. It was very faint, but it was. Something was coming. It was either something very big, or a *lot* of somethings. Either which way, the small tremors were growing in intensity every second. He listened hard, but the static in his audio receptors decided to take that moment to become a loud nuisance. He growled something and cast a look at the captured Autobot. She was looking around with a mixture of interest and worry upon her own features.

Hookshot grunted something and heaved himself upright, shimmying up the wall he had been sat against. He swayed momentarily on his feet before lurching across to one of the computers. He pressed several of the buttons in sequence and the monitor fizzed with static of all colours. A few more buttons were pressed in sequence and the static cleared enough for him to see the view from atop the building. A large tank was trailing a fire engine, a car and four relatively small Constructicons. Flying above them, keeping pace, was a deep green military helicopter.

"Oh slag..." He muttered and turned around, optics wide.

"It's Raid." The Autobot commented quietly, a hint of hope edging her voice.

The rumbling was more solid now, and the noise of engines cut through the fading day. Hookshot made a staggering run to one corner of the room, disappearing into the shadows that separated two computer work stations. The former Jetstream heard a door being force open then closed. She wriggled against her bonds, putting as much energy into it as she could, steam escaping her mouth as the laboured movements started to overheat her systems. The noise of engines came to an abrupt halt. She paused in her efforts to listen. Then familiar voices echoed in whispers down the main corridor.

"There's only one here." Flashpoint said quietly. "Directly ahead, in the main control room."

She swallowed her pride and lifted her head, looking out into the main corridor.

"Help!" She shouted, the word leaving her as an embarrassingly feeble whine.

"Friend or foe?" Shouted an unfamiliar, worried sounding voice from the darkness.

She swore. Her infrared was starting to fail horribly, leaving her with a mass of randomly placed heat signatures in her vision.

"Friend." She replied weakly, albeit slightly annoyed.

Raid was the first to enter through the gaping hole that was all that remained of the doorway. Flashpoint and Deadmetal appeared at his sides, while the four Constructicons and Blue Falcon fought to get a view into the room.

"It's Jetstream!" Commented Blue Falcon bitterly.

"I'm an Autobot spy," She said. "My unit commander is Juggernaut. I've been working as a Decepticon under the guise of Jetstream for quite some time now."

"Why should we believe you?" Blue Falcon snorted from behind Flashpoint. "Afterall, you've tried killing us numerous times."

"True... And I'm truly sorry about that, but if I didn't act like a Decepticon, then I'd have been found out." She said.

"Looks like you already have been found out." Wrench said from somewhere within the mass of bodies, his two red optics the only things visible.

Raid stepped forward and the others piled into the doorway.

"Woah... What a mess..." Shrapnel commented absently as he took in the room.

"Yep. Got Galaxy written all over it." Flashpoint said with some semblance of a sigh.

"What's your designation, soldier?" Raid rumbled as he towered over her.

"Turbine, sir." She said.

There was a brief flicker of recognition behind his lenses.

"Thought I recognised the voice." He said and leaned down, prying the bonds apart. "I may require some help. These chains are tough." He grunted.

"Stand aside, I got this in the bucket!" Lokjaw said as he stepped in to the room.

Raid gave him an odd look and caught Flashpoint putting a hand to his face and shaking his head solemnly out of the corner of his vision. Deadmetal merely chuckled in amusement.

"All right, let's see..." Lokjaw mumbled as he crouched down and inspected the chains.

Turbine looked over her shoulder and watched him with curiosity.

"I didn't realise you had some Constructicons on your team." She said slowly as Lokjaw started burning through the thick bonds with his integrated blow torch.

"We didn't." Blue Falcon said flatly, still not keen on the idea of having a member of the team wearing Decepticon insignias.

"Galaxy 'persuaded' them, from what I gather." Flashpoint said.

"Absolutely. It were an offer we couldn't refuse." Shrapnel said brightly.

"Well, we could've. It'd just ended up in lots of death." Sideblast muttered, almost to himself.

"Such a nice female. Very polite." Wrench added unnervingly cheerfully.

Sideblast glared at him momentarily whilst everyone else, Turbine included, gave him an odd look.

"What? You ever been threatened by her before?" He said mildly defensively.

"Many times." Raid said.

"Then you know how scary it is!"

Raid gave a quick grin and returned his attention to the welder.

"Nearly there..." Lokjaw said.

There was en masse clattering as the chains fell away, piling up on the floor and across Turbine's lap.

She leaned forward, gently and carefully flexing her arms and the remains of her wings. She winced as several pops and creaks rang out. She opened her mouth to say something, but Flashpoint was already bearing down on her.

"Let's get you into the medical bay." He said and heaved her to her feet.

"Gundog, I want you up on the roof keeping look out. Blue Falcon, Lokjaw, the main gates. Sideblast, Shrapnel, the back door. Wrench, you're with me. We're gonna go find Speeder. Let no Decepticon get near, understand?" Raid said. "And until Galaxy returns to us, Deadmetal's in charge."

There was a chorus of Yessir's and Raid walked out, Wrench following closely behind.

## Gygax

Krusher rolled and bounced across the ground, sparks skittering as he went. He came to an abrupt halt against a chunk of felled bridge. The wrecked, metal corpse of a dead Autobot hung limply over the piece of charred and twisted roadway, dark optics staring blankly at him. Energon bubbled into his mouth and pain seared through his systems. He wondered how he was still online and how Galaxy was still functioning perfectly.

"Oh now, don't lookit me like that." She purred dangerously as she encroached on him. "Y'know I like challenges. And I know you do too."

Krusher hauled himself back to his feet, his body creaking and clickling, sparks fountaining from every joint. Several pieces of his armour had been torn away and discarded as if they were nothing more than mere household waste. Beneath all that forboding armour, she mused, he was actually quite slender and delicate looking. He drew himself to his full height, locking gazes defiantly. He had no ammunition left and to use his EMP or plasma based weaponry would render him unconscious. He'd much rather go out seeing what was happening, than die in sleep mode. He lurched and used what momentum he could muster to throw himself at her. They collided with an almighty *CLANG*. Galaxy staggered backwards as Krusher worked his fingers into a seam between her armour. He heaved and metal gave a grudging moan as it started to buckled and peel away, trailing a dribble of Energon and a few sparks. Galaxy growled and finally managed to pull him off of her body. She held him out at arm's length, his feet on the floor, but not being of any support. She had a large hand around his neck. She looked him dead in the optic, that one remaining, undamaged visual sensor gleaming with a malicious red. He smiled at her as she brought her other hand up, gripping his right shoulder.

"It's been an honour fighting you, Galaxy." He rumbled, his voice filled with static. "You were a good student and you've evolved into a fine warrior. It's just a shame you decided to defect from our cause." "You're a slaggin' good teacher, Krusher, I'll admit. Your choice in faction and friends just let you down." She said, her grip suddenly tightening. "I hope you find peace from whatever demons haunt your Spark." Krusher gave one last smile. It wasn't a cruel or a bitter smile. It was a welcoming, warm smile. His optic dimmed. Galaxy heaved, pulling his body apart in a flurry of sparks, Energon streaming down from the two pieces of the Decepticon. She grunted and let him drop to the floor. She turned around. She was one of the few left on the battle field that was still alive. She could see Ironhide and the remnants of his unit walking slowly across the carnage, finishing off any still functioning Decepticons and gathering their fallen comrades.

"Gundog? You still out there?" She transmitted.

There was a shout from the opposite side of the basin. All optics focused on the location where it had come from. One of Ironhide's unit scabbled through the debris and bodies and hauled him from his hiding place, grinning like an idiot, weapons still smoking. Galaxy looked down at the Krusher's remains.

A lone spark jumped for freedom from his left hand. She silently made her way across the basin towards Gundog.

"I got 'im." She said, picking him up and depositing him over her shoulder. "I need to get back to my own unit and see that this one gets some medical attention before he shuts down. Think you guys can cope without an extra set of hands for the clean-up?"

"Yessir. We have more on the way to help and sort through the deceased." The scarred Autobot said and paused, casting a mildly worried look at Gundog who was hanging over her shoulder, playing with a loose bit of armour and singing softly to himself in a low, burbling tone.

"He's lost a lot of Energon." Galaxy commented.

### *Nyxen 3 - Bresham*

A Doberman and a Dalmation dressed in the dark blue uniform of police officers looked down at the white sheet that was tented in the corner of the old yard. The Crime Scene Investigation unit was swarming the place and their chief was slowly running out of questions to ask the two officers.

"So you just found him as is." The Pug said.

"Yeah. No fur, no flesh, just bones." The Doberman said bleakly.

His partner looked as if he was about to lose his lunch.

"Not even a foot print to suggest who did it." He shrugged helplessly.

"Yeeaah..." The chief said slowly, with a hint of annoyance. "There isn't even any finger prints."

"I'm wonderin' why anybody would want to skin someone!" The Dalmation exclaimed, still horrified by the discovery.

"If we find out, we'll let you know." The chief said. "But right now, you better get yer partner here some water and possibly some counsillin' too."

"That might be an idea." The officer conceded with a slow nod. "C'mon man, let's go. Jerry and Sue are here to take over guard duty."

He put a paw on his partner's shoulder and guided him out back into the street where various people were gathering to gawk at the sudden influx of police officers.

Lurking on the otherside of town, Spinner hauled his two old potatoe sacks into the undergrowth of an old park. In one sack was the pelt of the luckless George Furman, neatly folded so as not to get too much blood on the fur. In the second sack that was slung over his shoulder was the contents of the Fox's body. Everything from his soleus muscles to his gall bladder was squeezed haphazardly into the large sack. It was a blessing that it was only now that the contents of that particular heavy sack had decided to start dribbling red across the ground. It would be few more days until the police would see fit to extend their search throughout the entire town. By then he'd be long gone, and on the otherside of the galaxy, trading in the pieces of organic for something much more valuable. What that was, though, he wasn't entirely sure. He'd have to browse the shelves once he got there.

## 16 - Second Chances

### Ankmor

Deadmetal stood beside the repair table, looking down at the mess and tangle of charred metal and wiring. Various thin tubes and clusters of wiring were all that were keeping Speeder online. A blue optic, horribly dim in contrast to Deadmetal's own stared up, focusing on whatever was within range. Other than Gundog who was lay on the repair table beside Speeder's own, they were alone. The legless bot was in stasis while he recovered, but Speeder, even in the tattered and charred state he was currently in, seemed to be fully aware of what was going on around him.

"So, *Galaxy* bullied four Constructicons into joining our team?" He transmitted, a hint of amusement edging his crackling tone.

Deadmetal nodded, relieved that his friend still had some grip on humour.

"Scared them stupid, from what I hear." He replied.

"When we goin' back to our *Gygax* base?" Speeder asked after a moment.

He was still having to concentrate on gathering words together in an understandable sentence and then transmitting them.

"Once Raid gives the go-ahead, then we'll be on our way. He's just awaiting for confirmation from *Iacon*."

Another moment's pause.

"What about the *Solstice*? Any news on that?"

"Mainframe left us a message. They finished the repair job yesterday while we were, uh *busy*." He replied.

Speeder tried cracking a grin but instead gained a few sparks and something that would frighten even demons.

### Gygax

Roadtrain dragged Turbulance from the basin. They had fallen out of sight of the clean-up crew; something Roadtrain was grateful for. He didn't intend on going offline anytime soon.

"Wake up!" He growled irritably and kicked the black and silver Decepticon in the side.

Red optics flared to life and Turbulance heaved himself into a sitting position.

"Ungh... Whut 'appened...?" He muttered, rubbing at the dent in his helm.

"You got a swift kicking from Deadmetal, that's what." Roadtrain replied.

Turbulance muttered and pulled himself to his feet.

"What about the others?" He asked, looking around.

"Krusher's dead. Done in by *Galaxy*. Saw it m'self. She tore him in half." He gave a low, unnerving chuckle. Turbulance gave him an odd look. Roadtrain continued. "Steele's just as dead. Blew himself up during a tussle with Speeder. Weren't much left of either of them. Hookshot's fled from our old base. The Autobot's have reclaimed it. He's now headed back with Crash, Burnout and Flare."

"Then I think that's where we'd best be off to." Turbulance said and started walking.

Roadtrain stayed put for a moment, contemplating his next move. He looked at the retreating back of Turbulance, his armour plating hanging loose or missing completely, his wings fractured and useless. He

then cast his gaze elsewhere, taking in his surroundings.

"Uhm... Nah." He said. You can go back!" He shouted after Turbulance, who stopped and looked over his shoulder at the old, battered transportation chief. "I think I might head to Kaon or Axiom Nexus. See what odd-jobs are going."

Turbulance shrugged.

"Suit yerself." He replied and continued walking.

### Seranta 3

The sea sucked lazily at the beach. Seagulls were circling around, looking for their next meal. One of the birds that was sat atop a worn-out old groyne screeched and flapped into the air to join its brethren as the air around it shimmered and crackled like static. A silver figure dropped out of the portal, one sack firmly under one arm and the other hanging over its shoulder. Spinner's feet sank into the sand as he landed, the water seeping into the new depressions, seeking to fill it in. Spinner surveyed the coast line. The cliffs were ragged and tall, and various shrubbery clung to the cliffsides as did the birds.

"Gotta be around here somewhere..." He muttered as he scanned the cliffs.

About halfway down the beach, the cliff face shimmered, as if someone had hidden an entrance from sight with a large piece of camouflage canvas. Spinner hefted the sacks again, re-doubling his grip and made for the suspect area of rock. When he approached it, he looked up at it suspiciously. The cliff shimmered in the breeze again. He prodded gently at it with a sharp finger. His finger went right through the rock with no resistance. He pulled his hand back, gathered himself and stepped through the portal. On the otherside were many relics from many different worlds. Everything from pelts to whole engines were scattered around in what seemed to be a haphazard way, yet each piece was actually quite neatly and appropriately arranged. Lining each, carved wall of the cavern were hand-made shelves, each one stuffed full of strange objects. Some he recognised, others he didn't. At the far end of the cavern was a large make-shift desk-cum-counter. There was no one sat at it. He looked around at the maze of goods, old and new, that he had just navigated. There was movement from a side room, the heavy, tattered but still usable black curtain rippling in the wind that coursed into the main chamber.

"Hello?" Spinner ventured.

"I'll be with you in a minute!" Replied a female voice.

There were a few curses and a series of metallic crashes before the curtain was peeled back and a tall, bulky figure stepped out. Deep purple, almost black armour shone in the torch light, the red markings adding a little extra to the overall sinisterness that the Decepticon presented.

"Right. What can I do for you?" She asked cheerfully, clasping her metallic hands in front of her.

"I've come to trade for some credit. And a new weapon." Spinner said.

"Well, you've come to the right place!" She said. "Now, what is it that you would like to trade, er..."

"Spinner. Minicon class, Decepticon." He supplied.

"Bandit. If you didn't already know." She replied.

She then gestured at the two sacks he was holding.

"That what you want to trade?" She asked curiously.

"Yep. I just hope you're still interested in the organic thing." He said and opened one of the sacks up. Bandit crouched down and inspected the contents without touching.

"Hmmm... A new pelt... Looks to be in good condition..." She said thoughtfully.

"This is the rest of him. Sort of. Didn't have room for the skeleton..."

Bandit took the sacks off him, picking them up with incredible gentleness between forefinger and thumb and carefully deposited them on her desk. She sat down and emptied them, depositing the messier goods onto a rubber mat that she had pulled from the recesses of a drawer. She shuffled through the various organs and muscles, looking at each one with as much scrutiny as a jeweller would inspect a diamond.

"Hmmm... There's some damage to the liver... And the kidneys..." She said slowly as she eyed them up. "But they might be of use. As for the rest, well, they're in good nick and will do well in the necromancy and science areas." She picked up four small devices from another drawer and set up one at each corner of the mat. There was a barely audible hum and a green coloured forcefield domed around the organs. Bandit caught Spinner's curious look.

"It's a high-tech pickling jar." She said with a twist of a smile. "Except without the liquids."

She gently pulled the pelt from the other sack and unfurled it. There were neat cuts up the limbs and down the body. Two hollow eyes stared at her blankly as the empty maw hung open.

"The tail's still intact." She said carefully fiddling with the tail, feeling the bone beneath her alloyed fingertips. "That's good. What species is this...?" She prompted.

"Anthropomorphic Fox from the planet Nyxen 3." Spinner said.

"Alive or dead?"

"Alive. I wanted to see the fear in his eyes..." Spinner sneered.

"Wonder what he did to deserve this." She muttered as she inspected the pelt further. "Actually, I don't really want to know the details. Just gimme the barest of outlines as to his sin. If there was one, that is."

"He was abusive to all around him." Spinner replied and left it at that.

"Hmmm.. Moragan might be interested in this pelt. I'll have to give him a ring later." She said and tucked it back into its sack and deposited it into a refrigerator styled machine.

"So...?" The small bot prompted slowly.

"Soooo, I reckon... All this'll put you in at ten thousand five hundred and two Credits. Your choice in weapon will be deducted from this total. That is if you still wish to peruse the contents of my humble establishment."

Spinner nodded.

"Do you have any EMP guns?" He asked. "As in, Minicon sized."

Bandit leaned over the edge of her desk and looked down at him. After a moment, she pulled herself from her seat.

"I think I have just the perfect thing for you." She said and beckoned for him to follow her into a maze of weaponry.

She stopped at a small cabinet and retrieved a narrow, sleek silver gun from it. It was half the length of his forearm.

"How about this? Only been used once, due to the original owner getting on the wrong side of Astrotrain. Or so I'm told, anyway." She handed it down to Spinner who inspected it quite thoroughly. "Five hundred Credits. You can try it out if you want, I got a target range out back."

Spinner nodded and let it intergrate into his arm. It fit perfectly and didn't feel wrong. It felt good. It felt natural. He followed Bandit out into an adjacent chamber. It was long and tall, and had a set of targets, all of various sizes set up at the far end. Spinner brought the small EMP gun to bear. It hummed into life. He aligned his targeting system to the weapon and took aim. The target he had within his crosshairs shattered in a fountain of concentrated electricity and wood. He took another shot, hitting another target. He raised his arm, the muzzle of the gun pointed toward the roof. He looked up at Bandit, who was smiling.

"Nice shootin'." She commented.

"It feels good." He said. "I'll take it."

"Excellent!" She beamed. "I know you'll use it wisely. Now, is there anything else I can help you with...?" Spinner shook his head and put the gun away.

"Not as yet, no." He said.

"Right then, you now have ten thousand and two Credits remaining." She said.

She then lead him back out into the main chamber and back amongst the maze of collectibles.

"Right, before you travel any further, I would like to tell you something else, about my establishment.

There has been a new way set up for trading from a distance. If you have something you wish to trade, or if you simply wish to buy from me, or someone else, all you have to do is find yourself a trading shop or the like. Back on Cybertron, the bot you should be talking to is Swindle. He's the one who started all this. He'd be able to tell you more about the important details. It's a good, efficient system. Though, you must be warned: I'm not here all the time. I traverse the different worlds doing a spot of trading of my own. My co-worker, the Squid looking guy, covers for me during such excursions, and he is quite reliable and very trustworthy. There is a teleportation system set-up in each shop for quick delivery, too."

"Sounds interesting." Spinner said, absorbing every word. "I'll look in to it. It could save me some time."

"Indeed! That's what it's there for!" She grinned.

Spinner bade her good bye and stepped back out into the light and engaged his personal Space Bridge once more.

## Gygax

Turbulence sat on the repair table, staring blankly at the wall. Hookshot sat beside him and was doing the same.

"Well." Turbulence said after a moment. "It was interesting while it lasted."

Hookshot didn't say anything. He just listened.

"And Jetstream... An Autobot... Really didn't see that one coming." He mused. He cast a look at Hookshot. "You don't look so great."

"You don't look so great yerself." Hookshot muttered unhappily.

"Oh good." He said. "Thought you'd lost your voice, for a moment then." He added when the Constructicon finally looked at him.

There was another moment of silence in which not a lot happened. Propshaft was busy with the more serious casualties. Finally, Turbulence gave Hookshot a friendly nudge and a feeble smile. It was really the best he had ever been able to do.

"What's up?" He asked, taking a mental wild guess.

"I miss Steele." Hookshot rumbled somberly after a moment. "Yeah, he could be annoying. Especially when it came to tiny, helpless organics, but..." He trailed off and sighed. "He was still my brother. We've never been seperated for more then a week. Up until now."

Turbulence went back to staring at the wall.

"Mum's gonna have me smelted when she finds out." He added in a unhappy mutter.

Turbulence snorted a laugh. Hookshot gave him a bitter look.

"Sorry." He said, raising his hands helplessly. "Never had any siblings and the rest of the family unit never liked me, so my apologies if I seem cold Sparked about the whole situation."

"Meh. Never expected you to understand anyway. You only ever seem to use those around you to your own benefit."

"Not true." Turbulence protested.

"Really? What about Cable Cutter? Ironshod? Backslash? All those fembots you've come across over the years? Should I continue to list?"

Turbulence muttered something and folded his arms across his chest. Then the door to the medical bay opened. And a short figure appeared. It was a Minicon and he looked worn out, but otherwise unharmed.

"You Turbulance?" He asked.

"You Spinner?" Was the reply.

"Who wants to know?"

"Turbulence."

"Oh for the love of everything." Hookshot muttered. "*He* is Turbulance!" He jabbed a finger at the bot in question.

"Right then. I'm Spinner and I'm reporting for duty!"

Turbulence twisted a smile.

"Another one to add to the crew manifest?" Rumbled a voice.

Crash appeared at the door behind Spinner. The small Decepticon turned around, looked up and saluted primly.

"I invited him, sir. He helped us out back on Nyxen 3 before Carjack could do any major damage."

Turbulence admitted, hopping from the table and standing up, hands at his back.

Crash looked them both over.

"Ah yes. I heard about that. I'll give you a chance, Spinner. *One* chance. You bail out on us again, and I'll have you used as spares, understood?"

"Yessir, absolutely, sir!"

"Good. Now, if you do not require any medical attention, follow me and we'll get things straightened out."

Spinner followed Crash, leaving Turbulance and Hookshot behind.

"I wonder what we're gonna do now..." Hookshot sighed.

"No idea. I just hope Crash is a better commander than Krusher." Turbulance said.

There was another moment's silence.

"So, uh, what about the ship?" Hookshot asked after a moment.

"Huh?"

"The Epitaph. What's gonna happen to it?"

"Ship command gets handed over to the new Commander." Turbulance replied blankly. "Whoever that is."

Hookshot stared at him blankly and then shook his head.

"The second-in-command would be *you*, dip-stick." He said pointedly.

Turbulence stopped in mid-fiddle, the loose piece of wiring he was mucking about with caught between forefinger and thumb. A small smile spread across his metallic features as realisation set in.

"Oh yeah... So I am... With no Krusher, I'm your new boss."

"Might not be the case." Hookshot smiled. "Depends what Crash and Megatron have to say about it."

"Bugger." Turbulance said and sagged in his posture.

Hookshot laughed.