Buzzclaw winced as the explosion detonated, showering him with fragments of the girder he had been crouched behind a moment ago. The Maximal with whom he was engaged still had a couple of shells left and Buzzclaw couldn’t afford to be caught out in the open. He had to stick to cover and try to move without being seen.

Reflexively he checked the ammunition count on his weapons. The readout remained stubbornly at zero. The twin ion discs had been used to disassemble the luckless Diver, a Maximal with an aquatic alt-mode forced to fight in one of the few arenas with nary a trickle to be seen. Diver had come apart in a crowd-pleasing spray of hydraulic fluid and Buzzclaw had exalted at his victory, but when he retrieved his discs, neither was charged and he could not spare the energon to reactivate them. His corrosive vomit, never a reliable or pleasant weapon to use, had failed him completely as it missed Armordillo by a wide-arc and only succeeding in giving away his position. Since that scare he had been down to his admittedly impressive claws and had spent most of the Game hiding. Now though, it was him or Armordillo. Kill or be killed.

Buzzclaw had always been an enthusiastic Predacon supporter. He never missed a Game and his memory chips were full of statistics and data from past contests. He knew this one was closer than most. While the draft was engineered to produce a good match, it rarely came down to one Predacon versus one Maximal. This was the sort of thing he would have delighted in as a spectator, but as a participant it terrified him.

Armordillo had been patiently tracking him since the vomit incident and now, having forcibly removed Drancron’s missile launcher after a surprise assault, he had the advantage in both position and fire-power.

Almost flat to the ground and in a crawl, Buzzclaw undertook a panicked system diagnostic. While his weapons were useless, he himself was in reasonable shape. His armor had absorbed a few cuts and burns, but his structural integrity was at least ninety-six percent. His spark was strong, and although his energon levels were lower than he would like, he figured Armordillo’s were at least as bad. He couldn’t complain, but it would count for nothing if he couldn’t close the gap. Strategies scrolled through his onboard computer, most of them accumulated from previous Games. Unfortunately very few were appropriate. With mounting dread, Buzzclaw realized that he had never seen any contestant, Predacon or Maximal, win from a statistically similar position. A part of him thought that he’d like to take out a large bet against himself, though Frostbite would certainly have skewed the odds so the payout would be minimal.

There was a long-abandoned dwelling to his left. It was a rusted out husk, really just a one-story shack. For all Buzzclaw knew it had been purpose-built to provide the Games some tactical nuance. He didn’t like the odds of it deflecting an aimed missile, but it might provide some cover from the shock and shrapnel of an indirect blast. Buzzclaw crawled through the portal where the front door would have been if the sliding mechanism wasn’t stuck perpetually open, corroded and powered down. He drew himself into a dark corner and extended his sensors outwards. This was a tricky game of risk versus reward and was about the last thing Buzzclaw wanted to do. If Armordillo was searching for the right frequency, he would be able to zero in on Buzzclaw’s electromagnetic signature and blast him with total accuracy.

Buzzclaw’s onboard computer interpreted the information by superimposing ghostly images of the arena beyond the little structure onto the feed from his optics. Armordillo had not moved, still casting the stolen missile launcher left and right as he searched for more conventional visual confirmation of Buzzclaw’s position. This was an advantage then, but without ranged weapons, not much of one.

There was a rusted metal spike in the corner of the room. Whether it had been deliberately placed by the Builders to be used as a weapon or whether it was just a piece of debris Buzzclaw didn’t know, but it was
relatively straight and looked like it might be employed as a javelin if enough force were applied. He grabbed the would-be weapon and very slowly, very carefully exited from the rear window of the structure. Sensor scans revealed that Armordillo was still waiting patiently as he conserved energon. His telltale sneer evinced his confidence that his fire-power advantage would win the day. *It probably will* said Buzzclaw, in the privacy of his own cranial unit. The Maximal was positioned in an open part of the arena in order to give himself a wide field of vision without obstruction; any attack based on stealth was simply out of the question.

Buzzclaw spun his Transformation Cog as quickly as he could, leaping into the air as his body reconfigured into his ornithopter alt-mode. He wasn’t an overly fast or agile flier but he didn’t have much distance to cover and it certainly beat walking to his doom. He cleared the bot-level debris and added a hypersonic shriek to his attack, in hope of baffling Armordillo’s sensors with white noise. The orange and green Predacon raised one of the manipulator arms that his alt-mode allowed him to retain and made ready to launch the spike. At that moment the Maximal whipped round and fired. The missile crossed the distance between them in a fraction of a second, catching Buzzclaw dead-center.

Red emergency glyphs exploded across his optics as damage control systems gave themselves over to electronic panic. He was barely off the ground so the tail-spin he found himself in ended abruptly as he impacted the arena floor, losing a manipulator arm and half a wing in the crash. Instinctively he pushed himself back into robot mode and screamed as the transformation sequence groped for components shattered or simply gone. Still, he managed to get upright, one-armed and half blind, just in time to see the triumphant Armordillo charge, wind-milling with his morning-star.

Buzzclaw raised a pathetic claw to block the blow and the morning-star caught him in the damaged shoulder, which smashed and sprayed coolant everywhere. Buzzclaw was on his knees and knew he was done for. Had he been watching the fight he would have been in two minds, disappointment at a Predacon defeat (and probably the loss of a few credits) competing with the primal thrill of watching a bot be dismembered. Now that he was that bot, he wanted nothing more than for Armordillo to make it quick. He powered down his optics, unable to watch as the Maximal raised the primitive weapon but unable to tune out the sickening crunch of delicate cranial circuitry being pulverized. It took him a moment to realize that he was still online.

Very slowly, Buzzclaw opened the armored shutter over one eye. He found himself face to face with a pair of incredibly surprised optics. Armordillo had tripped. At the last moment he had stumbled on Buzzclaw’s broken wing and fallen forwards, dropped his morning-star and, in an improbable turn of events, impaled his own throat and main energon-duct with the iron spike that Buzzclaw barely remembered picking up.
As he leaked energon and his onboard computer struggled to run even basic functions, Buzzclaw’s sensors cut in and out. He was completely unable to calculate the utter surprise of his victory. When Supersonic raised his damaged claw in triumph, he was barely able to register his enthusiasm. The pleasantries dealt with to the Builder’s satisfaction, his damage control systems gave a warning shriek and he felt stasis lock take him like a heavy blanket.

“I don’t get it.”

“Don’t get what?” Buzzclaw shook his head, vaguely annoyed at being brought back to the here and now.

“You like... nearly died...” The yellow and green Predacon shrugged her hunched wheels.

Buzzclaw looked at his companion with utter incomprehension. “Yeah, but I won.” He paused the recording and blinked at Ser-Ket, “I did win, you know.”

“I know... but... wasn’t that like, a hundred stellar cycles ago?”

Buzzclaw spluttered in genuine outrage, “Barely a dozen!”

“Well what do you think about what that bot, Lio Convoy, said on the news the other day? That it’s all rigged. The Games are fixed?”

“That was a complete fabrication; anyone can tell I was fighting for my life!”

Ser-Ket narrowed her optics, “I don’t know—the way Armadillo—”

“Armordillo,” he corrected automatically.

“—Armordillo just sort of... tripped and fell like that... it makes you wonder.”

“Tripped and..? For your information, I placed that spike there quite deliberately; he fell into my expertly crafted trap. Supersonic said so, you heard it.” Yes, thought Buzzclaw, and I almost believe it myself.

Skepticism was writ large on her wide optics. “Yeah... maybe...”

The bar-bot sidled over to them. Dipole, the proprietor of The Proton Blaster, was spindly and long-limbed, with prominent optics. She either didn’t have an alt-mode at all or turned into some sort of radio aerial. She sported no insignia, and had never gotten a straight answer if she was Maximal or Predacon or even Builder. Damaxus was an open city, one of the few; she could be any of those things or none.

“Not watching that old recording again?” The voice came out of a speaker with no lips or mandibles to give it an expression but it still managed to convey a mixture of indifference and contempt.
“What? I don’t know what you mean!” Buzzclaw was outraged. “I haven’t seen it in...” he groped for a plausible answer. “A while...” he finished lamely.

“See...” said Dipole, “Why don’t you get your own vidscreen? You’re always in here flashing your Winner’s Stipend.”

“Erm... I mean, this IS a sports bar, right?” Buzzclaw glanced at Ser-Ket who was now regarding him with the most dreadful expression possible—abject pity.

“No, but you see... the thing is...” Buzzclaw was losing his audience, and it was all down to that stupid bar-bot. “Listen here, you, just... just go back to serving us or I’ll...”

“You’ll what? You’re in here every faulted day. You think they’ll put up with you over at Abel’s Energon?”

“Or I’ll... give you a very generous tip...” Dipole backed off and Buzzclaw figured he’d gotten away with it but apparently the sotto voce hadn’t been subtle enough as Ser-Ket was now standing, rearranging her shoulder-mounted wheels before leaving.

“Thanks Buzzclaw... it’s been...” she let the sentence trail in the air while she worked out what the experience had been. “Quite a night...?” she finished, doubtfully.

“Hey, Ser-Ket, it’s OK... I’ve got more credits...do you want another drink?” He turned frantically to the bar-bot, “I do have more credits, right?”

Dipole’s optics glazed over as she checked Buzzclaw’s tab. She shook her head sadly.

“Thanks, but I better be going. I’ve got...” and then Ser-Ket was gone, bar portal swishing shut behind her.

Buzzclaw hung his head and turned back to the bar. “The stipend is coming tomorrow, I swear.” He said, “How about another tonight? You can withdraw from my account in the morning.”

Ser-Ket checked her internal chronometer. She still had time to meet Vamp and the others if she hurried. She cursed herself for wasting so much time on Buzzclaw and then cursed herself again for thinking that way.

It wasn’t Buzzclaw’s fault really. The win in the arena was the one thing that separated him from the rest of society and an enforced quasi-functionist, subsistence-level existence—who could really blame him for coasting on former glories?

She was still processing this when she became aware of a whistling noise. She looked up and was astonished to see a black shape descending rapidly. She stared, transfixed, as it split into several smaller shapes and exploded.

Ser-Ket hurled herself to the greasy metal street as debris rained about her. She spread her wings wide to shield the more vulnerable parts of her body. Risking a glance upwards she saw bots milling about in panic,
transforming and driving off or just running for cover. Here and there she saw the glazed optics of bots shell-
shocked into feedback loops, just sitting in the street, unable to comprehend what had happened.

She sprang to her clawed feet and began to run.

Buzzclaw had barely raised his canister in appreciation of Dipole’s unexpected generosity when the blast hit.
The floor started to vibrate and memorabilia of Games past rattled off the walls.

“What was in that?” he mumbled, staring into the bottom of the empty canister. Irony-proof tox-warnings
flashed across his vision to inform him just how crude the chemical make-up really was of the substance he was
subjecting his fuel-pump to.

He looked round the bar, expecting to see the other patrons staring in confusion, or maybe ducking and
covering, perhaps laughing at the shock of it, instead they all stared open-mouthed, should they have a mouth, at
the bar vid-screen.

“That’s it,” someone’s said. “The balloon’s gone up.”

“Can’t be.” Another voice joined in, “Lio Convoy’s just a nutter, isn’t he?”

The door flew open again, Ser-Ket was back and she had a wild look to her optics. She slammed the door
behind her and engaged the locking sequence. “This is really bad.” she said, but seemed too shocked to say
much more.

Buzzclaw tried his best to filter the vid-audio from the background chatter, “This cowardly attack was an
indiscriminate wave of destruction damaging several key government landmarks. The attack has been
accompanied by widespread panic, and a mob trying their best to take advantage of the situation. We urge every
able-chassied, freedom-loving Cybertronian to take up arms against these terrorists and crush this so called
resistance before it can cause even more disruption to our way of life.”

Another blast and the screen snapped off in a burst of static, “They’re getting closer!” yelled a hunched, crab-
looking thing from the back of the crowd.

“Who are getting closer?” Buzzclaw tried to ask, but no-one was listening to him. Instead each succumb to
panic in their own particular way. As the third, even nearer blast detonated, a large, easy-going Maximal that
Buzzclaw had spoken to on a few occasions transformed involuntarily, turning into a rugged all-terrain vehicle
in the center of the bar.

“It’s the resistance! Or the government... or both of them!” A savage looking Predacon that Buzzclaw thought
was called Reckless, Recluse, Wreckloose or something ran towards the door. It slid open to let him out but
he only got three more steps. A volley of energy blasts cut him off at the hip and his torso exploded, green and
purple fragments scattered in a wide arc.
“Scrap!” Buzzclaw looked around for the bar-bot but it was gone, although the delicate sculpture that stood motionless in one corner looked a bit more complicated than usual.

“What do we do?” a bot called Knockdown asked frantically.

Buzzclaw had no words, terror had super-charged his purification circuits and drained power from a number of internal systems to flush the engex and grant him clarity. Unfortunately clarity did not bring any useful information, merely a better sense of how much trouble he was in.

The babble in the bar was almost unbearable as it consumed multiple frequencies. Data packets took digital flight and sub-vocal communications became a constant stream that was impossible to parse. Two things were clear though; no-one had any idea what to do, and no-one was listening to each other.

Suddenly a familiar voice cut through the cacophony, “Buzzclaw, you’re a Champion, what should we do?”

Oh no Ser-Ket, please not now.

“A Champion?"
“Oh, good was he?”
“I think so, I can’t remember."
“They’re all pretty good.”
“He’ll know what to do.”

Scrap.

All Buzzclaw could think to do was to get another drink but he couldn’t see that going too well. He de-fragged his vocal processor.

“Erm... ladies and gentle-bots,” he announced in what he hoped was a commanding tone, “Clearly the situation has become... somewhat... hazardous. Therefore I propose we... err”

“Yes?” asked Ser-Ket, conveniently forgetting her previous skepticism.

“Barricade ourselves in the bar?” he finished, unable to prevent it coming out as a question.

Amazingly it seemed to work, “I can do that!” a burly, enthusiastic Maximal named Backstop said. He lumbered to the door and started wedging heavy furniture in front of it.

“What next boss?”

“OK...” said Buzzclaw as he searched for insightful words, but found himself left with his old fall-back, “We can... have a drink, and wait for all of this to blow over?”

An enthusiastic cheer rang out as the assembled bots started to help themselves. The wiry sculpture in the corner twitched slightly as the revelry started, but did nothing to prevent it.
Not long later, Buzzclaw was seated at the head of his little band of twenty or so bar patrons as he explained exactly the best way to survive a strafing attack from an Omega Sentinel. He was enjoying himself immensely. It helped that the engex was flowing, of course, but either way, the bar seemed secure enough, everyone was happy and intact. It was a great plan. He was a great leader.

Ser-Ket tapped him on the shoulder, “There hasn’t been a blast for a while, we really should find out what’s happening outside.” she said, earnestly.

“Oh very well...” Buzzclaw didn’t want to know what was happening outside. Inside he had a captive audience. This was the first time he had felt good about himself since... probably the Game, and even that had been tinged with suspicion about the way Armordillo had died.

Very cautiously he sidled over to the window, raised a claw to the metal shutter and hinged it slightly upwards.

It was daylight outside. Cybertron’s weak sun bathed the wrecked street in a copper glow. Buzzclaw could see smashed shops, other bars, clouds of filings and bits of Wreckloose, but everything seemed to be quiet.

“Are we clear?” Ser-Ket asked, “Can we leave?”

A very serious piece of Buzzclaw wanted to say no, but even with a few quarts of engex in him, he could see how doomed that plan would be.

“I think so, if we go quickly and quietly.”

Buzzclaw looked round The Proton Blaster as the variously shaped and colored bots gathered belongings, supplies, bits of themselves, said their goodbyes and started to leave. He only had the vaguest idea of what the violence was actually about but he had a feeling it was far from over. There was a good chance he would never see any of these people again. It made him sad, but, on the other hand, if they all went off and got themselves killed, at least they would remember him as the hero who led them through that first day.

As the various Maximals and Predacons transformed and drove, flew, slithered or scampered away from the bar, Buzzclaw found himself alone with Ser-Ket and an unfamiliar black and gray Maximal who hadn’t said much all night.

“Thanks Buzzclaw, that was amazing.” Ser-Ket touched his arm with a talon, “you were really brave.”

Buzzclaw felt a flush of pride, deserved or not - he wouldn’t let it worry him at this precise moment.

The stranger walked up to him and regarded him with an appraising air. “She’s right–we needed a leader in a tricky situation and you stepped up. I could see you going a long way.”

“Thank you… it was just, you know, instinct. Sorry I didn’t catch your name.”

“Cybershark–Buzzclaw isn’t it? You know, we studied that Game of yours back at HQ–you beating Armordillo. That’s actually why I was at the bar, I wanted to meet you.” Cybershark grinned–there were a lot of teeth.

Buzzclaw drew himself up to his full height, shorter than either Cybershark or Ser-Ket but nonetheless he felt
puffed with importance, “I’m sorry I couldn’t see you earlier but clearly…” he waved a claw vaguely around the empty bar.

“You were busy, I understand. That’s fine actually; I got to see you in action—even better for our purposes.” Cybershark briefly shut down one optic in the Cybertronian version of a wink.

Buzzclaw could not help but set his mandibles in a broad grin, but nonetheless, he had questions. “Purposes? HQ? Who exactly are you?”

“Presumably you watch the news?” Cybershark gestured at the busted vidscreen.

“Yes, of course… sometimes.” Buzzclaw didn’t—he watched the Games, and would sometimes tune into the news if they were talking about the Games, but that was pretty much it.

“Well it’s total scrap. Cybertron’s on the edge of a precipice and I represent the group that’s going to catch it when it falls.”

Understanding dawned, “The Resistance–Lio Convoy, but I thought…”

“That we were behind the bombs? The attacks? I’m not going to lie to you; I can see you’re far too smart for that—we were. The Builders control everything; this isn’t news to you, surely? They make us fight and die—for their amusement, yes, but more importantly for their security. If we’re fighting each other, we’re not fighting them, and if it’s organized, so much the better, and so much easier to police. You were enjoying being a Champion, I get that, I don’t blame you, your victory was well fought and well-deserved, but tell me you weren’t living in fear that the next knock on the door would be to take part in a Cull.”

Buzzclaw didn’t say anything but he couldn’t deny it. It was a thought that occupied a great percentage of his functional moments, unless he dulled it with engex or gambling.

“Lio Convoy saw the light and is showing us the way. We need to fight. We can’t beat the Builders with words or negotiation. They were at war for millions of years before they fell into this moribund state—it’s the only language they understand.”

Buzzclaw could see that Ser-Ket’s spiked mouth was wide open, hanging on Cybershark’s every word. The combination of pride and jealousy that welled up was lethal, “So what do you need me for?”

Cybershark grabbed both his shoulders, looking him optic to optic, to impress the gravity of the situation, “As I said, we studied your victory. We’re having some successes but we’re small in number, without great fighters, great leaders, we’re not going to make it, so a few of us are going round, recruiting past Champions, and you were who I picked.”

Ser-Ket practically trembled with excitement as she turned back to Buzzclaw, “You have to say yes, you simply have to!”

Buzzclaw looked from one to the other and realized he wasn’t going to allow himself a choice on this. It was only after he had slapped Cybershark’s shoulder in what he hoped was martial camaraderie that he realized he didn’t really know what he had agreed to…
The next few mega-cycles were a blur. Cybershark was friendly enough but he insisted on speed and stealth above all else. He led them through bombed out streets and barricaded intersections before ducking underground. Seemingly at random, they entered a sewer duct, the Maximal letting them cling onto his submersible mode for easier transport through the sludge and rusted filings as they dove deeper. Into the Stygian depths of Cybertron they traveled, until they came to an ancient MTS terminal, vitreous tubes crisscrossing the subsurface of the planet built millions of stellar cycles earlier. With a toothy grin, Cybershark waved his hand at a bulletcar with an open door. “The resistance refurbished a few lines and has been able to travel from city to city undetected for quite some time.”

The ride passed in silence, with Buzzclaw lost in thought. The bulletcar was far too large for them, having been built to Builder scale during the Golden Age, and riding in it made him feel insignificant. He didn’t much care for the feeling. When they arrived somewhere—Cybershark was vague as to where—they had to reverse their descent, traveling laboriously back towards the surface. Just when he thought the journey would never end, Cybershark held up a palm. “Are we there yet,” Buzzclaw asked in what he hoped wasn’t a whine. The Maximal opened a direct wireless communication. “Very nearly.”

It turned out that Cybershark had been waiting for some kind of signal that only he could detect. Cautiously scanning left and right he pried open a bothole cover and bade them follow him inside. There was a rusted ladder and it was pitch dark. Buzzclaw switched to infrared, which showed him a narrow shaft, corroded by age and neglect, leading to a surprisingly modern looking blast door. Cybershark unscrewed one of his finger-tips, uncovering a data-jack and inserting it into the lock. The blast door hissed open and Buzzclaw was once again bathed in light.

Resistance HQ was a hive of activity, Predacons and Maximals of all shapes, sizes and configurations walked, rolled or buzzed through the repurposed pumping station. While the space was obviously ancient, corroded and decaying from centuries upon centuries of exposure to toxic run-off, modern consoles and power supplies had been brought in from outside so the room was bathed in the neon glow of infographics and strip-lighting. Buzzclaw realized he was gaping, and made a conscious effort to appear more aloof, affecting an air that this was all in a day’s work.

Ser-Ket made no such effort, “This is amazing!” she gushed, “I’ve never seen so many bots in one place.”

Thinking about it, she was right. Energon supplies were so tight on the surface and government security patrols so all-pervasive that you just didn’t see activity on this scale, unless it was to watch a Game. Most people kept to themselves and their neighborhoods. Maximals and Predacons rarely mixed, except in neutral spaces, like the bar. No-one ever did anything to attract the attention of strangers, lest they turned out to be trouble. Here Maximals and Predacons worked together, and everyone seemed to have a million things to do.

“It might look impressive,” Cybershark was saying, “But as I told you, we badly need more botpower. That’s where you come in. Come on, there’s someone you need to meet.”

“Someone” turned out to be a regal looking red and white bot that Buzzclaw had definitely seen on the news. He raised a claw, “Don’t tell me it’s…”
“Lio Convoy…” breathed Ser-Ket, undisguised awe in her voice. “Supreme Commander of the resistance.”

The Maximal’s optics softened and he gave a small chuckle. “Some have styled me such, yes. Mostly Predacons. It is my honor to meet you…”

“Ser-Ket.”

“Quite so, and you are?”

“Buzzclaw.” He resisted the urge to salute.

“Excellent. My gnathic comrade here tells me that you’re going to help us out with a little project we’re working on.”

“Just doing my bit.” Buzzclaw cringed inside, this wasn’t him. He had barely even registered the existence of the resistance before he met Ser-Ket the previous evening. What in the Pit was he getting himself into?

“I am very gratified to hear it. As you surely know, the situation is grave. Our oppressors still see us as upstart radicals. We are winning local skirmishes, disrupting their activities, but this is not a long-term plan. For now they see us as an annoyance—the greatest annoyance they have faced in hundreds of cycles, yes, but one, nonetheless, that will be stamped out in short order.” His yellow eyes blazed as the urgency of his words broke through his calm nobility just a fraction. He was not a cheerful bot. There was wistful quality to him, but he had an intensity about him that made Buzzclaw feel like he was the most important bot Lio Convoy had ever spoken to. Buzzclaw rarely liked anyone, and sanctimonious Maximals least of all, and yet found himself wanting to live up to Lio Convoy’s trust.

“It is during this time, while we are still underestimated, that we need to cement our foothold and to do that we need fighters, warriors and tacticians. This is where you come in.”

He broke off, realizing that he was in danger of making this into a speech. “But I trust you will be at the briefing later. I’m afraid I have much to discuss with Cybershark, if you will excuse us.”

When the heavy sewer door had rolled shut behind them, Ser-Ket turned to Buzzclaw, practically bouncing with excitement. “That was him! This is amazing.”

Buzzclaw was still shaken from how much his meeting with Lio Convoy had affected him. There was no doubt about it, the Maximal certainly had charisma. He remembered his brief stint as the protector of The Proton Blaster and tried to suppress a twinge of envy. “So he’s the big chief around this parts?” He said, with a coolness he didn’t feel.

“Are you kidding? He’s the bot, he’s the reason all this…” Ser-Ket waved a talon around the bustling sewer-junction, “is possible. Lio Convoy exposed the corruption of the Builders for all to see and now he’s leading the charge against them. Don’t tell me you missed all that?” She narrowed her optics suspiciously.

“No, of course not, I just... he’s different to how I expected.” Despite his general disinterest in politics, Buzzclaw had been aware of that last Game, of the controversy that surrounded Lio Convoy’s accusations and...
the subsequent governmental backlash, but it had been mostly through an engex-fuelled haze. His main priority was how the riot in the stadium and subsequent escape of most of the contestants affected the rather sizeable bet he had placed on Predacon victory. And it had seemed like such a sure bet, too; Rage had essentially conquered the port city of Triax, going so far as to declare herself its queen. When she had taken the place of one of her subjects voluntarily, Buzzclaw knew a large wager was necessary. She had even stuck around, along with Autostinger, Nightviper, and Scourge, and declared victory in the face of a full Maximal abscondment. His bookie, Frostbite, had been adamant that until and unless the Builders declared for one side or the other, the Game was still in flux and his stake was going nowhere. Hence the parlous state of his finances in the bar the previous night.

“Why are you so excited, anyway?” He realized, despite having spent the last few hours with her, he didn’t actually know Ser-Ket very well.

“Are you kidding?” she exclaimed, “It’s because something is finally happening. Until a few days ago, all I had to look forward to was eventually being made to compete in a fragging Game! I mean, seriously!”

“Hey!” Buzzclaw rounded on her, asking, perhaps too defensively, “What’s wrong with that?”

“I’m a Predacon, Buzz, I’m part of a fragging warrior lineage going back to Razorclaw, Megatron and the Liege Maximo. Look at these…” she bared her teeth and spread her talons wide, “I’m supposed to fight, to conquer, not to play parlor games for these obsolete energon-hogs. My alt-mode is designed for combat on a world I’ve never seen, and one I’ll never see if bots like Lio Convoy don’t get the help they need to make some changes around here.”

Buzzclaw was stunned, Ser-Ket had not demonstrated at any point that she might be able to achieve such levels of intensity. Perhaps that was the effect meeting Lio Convoy had on people. “I never knew you felt so strongly.”

“Of course you didn’t! No-one ever does! On the surface you can never speak this freely because they’re everywhere, built into the fragging landscape, wired into everything, watching, listening, but down here it’s different, and up there it will be too, if I have anything to say about it.”

Buzzclaw was seriously starting to feel the side-effects of running his tox-purification filters at peak capacity for so long. His vision swam and his audio-receptors buzzed with feedback as he tried to articulate the way he felt, “I guess that makes a lot of sense.” was about all he could manage.

“You’re fragging right it does. This is the start of something huge, Buzz, and I really hope you’re in it with us.”

“Where else would I be?” and he realized he really didn’t know, although, looking around at the preparations for war, at the hundreds of faceplates running the gamut from shellshock, through grim resolve, all the way to revolutionary fervor, he privately suspected the answer was anywhere but here.
“This is your target.” Lio Convoy gestured to a blue-green schematic projected onto one of the cracked walls by his seemingly magical staff. The diagram showed a solid, blocky robot, legs wider than his torso, bristling with firepower and sensor nodes. Six red dots flanked the robot’s silhouette, three on a side with the dot on the bottom left circled in blue as part of an ancient and forgotten code. Buzzclaw recognized the design—it was much more Builder than either Maximal or Predacon—ancient technology by this point, but obviously lethal. He swallowed, nervously.

“It’s called Fortress Maximus.”

Buzzclaw looked round the room at his five companions and waited a moment to see if anyone would say what needed to be said, “That’s a Builder.”

“Yes indeed,” Lio Convoy did not change his tone, but there was warmth in his gaze, “A very prominent one.”

“Builders are huge! And you say this one’s in a prison? Why do we need to target a Builder who’s already in prison?”

Lio Convoy regarded him kindly, “I’m afraid I may not have made myself clear, friend, Fortress Maximus isn’t in prison—Fortress Maximus is a prison. The diagram is not entirely to scale.” He gestured with the staff and the schematic zoomed out, becoming a map of an entire skyline. Fortress Maximus stood among multi-story buildings that only came up to his knees.

“Fortress Maximus,” he continued, “is where they keep anyone they feel is politically... awkward. And that is why this mission is so important. We all know that the resistance is experiencing an upswing of popular support and that is obviously the goal, but without enough competent leaders, these... enthusiastic amateurs... will be vanquished when the ineluctable crackdown occurs. We cannot allow this. It would be a betrayal of everything we are fighting for. We need fighters, and planners to lead them, and Fortress Maximus has a convenient concentration of them all in one place.”

Buzzclaw felt like he might either pass out or pass lubricant. He was trying to work out which would be more embarrassing when a hulking Maximal, Bighorn, stood up in front of the group and said, “Piece of cake.”

The resistance leader nodded indulgently, “Thank you Bighorn—perhaps if I pass you over to the mission commander... Cybershark?”

Cybershark got up and walked to the front of the room. Buzzclaw could see no trace of the easy, toothy grin he displayed at the bar. “I’ve personally selected you because I recruited you all and you’re the best. There’s only going to be six of us because the odds of getting any more inside undetected were deemed too high. I could introduce you, but since you’re going to be watching each other’s skidplates under fire in the next few hours, I figure you can do that yourselves.”

Bighorn was first, “Most of you know me. Name’s Bighorn, demolitions and heavy weapons.”

Ser-Ket stood up, slightly nervously, “Hi, I’m Ser-Ket, hand, well actually, claw, obviously, claw to hand... err… combat specialist. So... right.”

A square-looking Maximal arose in a clatter of heavy armor. “I’m Survive. I came up with the battle plan and I’m going along to make sure we get it right.”
A lithe Maximal with his face set in a sneer was next, “I’m Corahda– I do a little bit of everything. I work best alone. Don’t none of you get in my way.”

Buzzclaw was still thinking, what a glitchhead when he realized he was next, “Hi, I’m Buzzclaw, Champion of the Games.” He realized everyone was waiting for more, “And I can fly, I guess.”

To his amazement this seemed to work, Bighorn nodded approvingly, “Makes sense.” he said, which seemed to satisfy everyone else.

Ser-Ket slapped Buzzclaw on the back and he started slightly with surprise, “Well done. This is really important, you know that. I’m glad I misjudged you.”

He nodded, dumbly, and she turned away, excitedly joining their new comrades in arms for the rest of the strategy discussion.

Fortress Maximus presided over the landscape of Tarn for mega-miles around. The great hulk of an Autobot had been one of the very few to sport an alt-mode colloquially referred to as a “city” - a self-sufficient battle-fortress with living quarters for several hundred bots and enough firepower to hold off several thousand. The colossal irony was that when the energon finally ran out and Fortress Maximus’ massive frame could no longer be powered, he simply froze in place, unable to spin his gigantic transformation cog one last time. Now he remained trapped in robot mode, still large enough to house an army, but unable to access the form that granted him the “Fortress” honorific.

Cybershark led his team from the transport, keeping low and quiet. From time to time he checked on a small silver canister, magnetically attached to his hip. When Ser-Ket had asked about it, Survive just growled need-to-know. As instructed, all resistance members were keeping their sensory apparatus and IFF signatures as low-key as possible. Tarn was a Decepticon city, populated almost entirely by Builders, so they could not count on any popular support once the shooting started.

To Buzzclaw’s relief the streets appeared to be deserted. He started a couple of times at metallic footsteps, but it was only the familiar sound of empties lurching about their business, rendered eerie by the silence. He shifted the extra fuel-tank that weighed heavily on his back. They were fully charged, and would be facing opposition who could barely transform for lack of energon.

“Maybe they’re all powered down.” Ser-Ket whispered, optimistically, echoing his sentiment. Cybershark shook his head and gestured, wordlessly, upwards. Wired into the spires and minarets of the city were the sedentary form of dozens of Builders, their ossified forms tumescent upon the architecture. Buzzclaw, like all Predacons, had seen the occasional Builder surveying their decrepit domains before, but this was something different. This was a cancer. He willed himself to be smaller and kept to the shadows with the rest of his team.

Finally they arrived at their designated position. After a moment spent searching the sky, Buzzclaw located silent black form of Lio Convoy’s transport hovering exactly where it was supposed to be. Cybershark counted
on his fingers, one, two... then he brought his fist down like a hammer.

The transport’s guns opened up in the general direction of Fortress Maximus. Buzzclaw’s sensor array went crazy as friendly IFFs suddenly lit up like beacons. The firepower was half high-explosive, half incendiary rounds, designed to be as distracting and conspicuous as possible. Within seconds the buildings surrounding Fortress Maximus’ enormous feet began to spit brightly colored blaster fire. Energy weapons were trained on the transport as the sepulchral inhabitants of Tarn sprang into action, drawing emergency rations of energon from the pipelines and conduits. What Micromaster patrols were present began to converge.

Cybershark made a gesture that meant, “time to go,” and they started to hurry after him, along carefully selected back-alleys, doubling-back towards Fortress Maximus. Buzzclaw lingered, unable to help watching in awe as Lio Convoy’s transport took a fatal strike to the engine. Just as the tailspin started, the Supreme Commander himself leapt from the crippled vehicle, powerful frame silhouetted against Luna Two, his staff poised to strike. He hit the ground like a thunderbolt, immediately striking left and right at luckless members of Tarn’s defense force. The rest of his team were around him now, expertly watching each other’s backs as they felled foe after foe. Realizing he was now badly behind, Buzzclaw scurried off, narrowly avoiding a stray photon charge as it blasted a chunk out of the alley wall.

Squeezeplay had been enjoying the stillness of Tarn’s night. Without the distraction of the daytime bustle of Decepticon Micromasters scurrying to and fro, he was able to devote more resources to his favorite pastime, watching vids of exotic mechanimals forced to fight each other. Back in the distant past, when he was mobile and not confined to monitor duty, he used to attend the fights personally, and place heavy bets on the outcomes. Now all these recordings were ancient and there was no money to be made he still enjoyed them for the combination of bloodlust and nostalgia they invoked within him. For some reason, the Games paled in comparison to the interplay of beasts.

It was with some alarm then that he realized he was getting emergency signals from across the grid. An unidentified transport had appeared in Tarn airspace and opened fire. The troubles that had plagued the slums and shanties of Maximal and Predacon had come to his once-glorious city.

Squeezeplay paused the vid just as the petro-rabbit grabbed the turbofox by the back of the neck in mid-transformation. He sent alternating demands for information and threats to all corners of his network, being rewarded only with confused accounts and static.

With horror Squeezeplay felt his grip on his sector of Tarn loosening. He was losing sensor-nodes at a worrying rate, each loss like someone removing another part of his brain. Oh how he longed to leave his perch and face the enemy up close but the time for that was long over. Even flexing his rusted-shut claws was no longer possible, let alone charging into battle.

Panicked reports started to come in, Crumplezone and Growl’s teams had engaged the enemy. There was something about a bot with a staff and a group of Maximals. Squeezeplay couldn’t make any sense out of it but it was obvious his bots were dying, many at a time, and horribly. He cursed their incompetence, threatening
repsals if no-one got him a clear tactical readout of the battle-site in the next few seconds. So intent he was on the garbled picture from the frontline that he failed to pick up on the fateful transmission until it was too late. “Transport’s going down, grid Pravus, clear the area!”

Squeezeplay registered the significance of the co-ordinates only nanokliks before the crashing transport smashed into the tower he was hardwired into. He stared in horror, forced to remain motionless by his own inefficient design, as the electrical grid shorted and the flames began to lick at the building. He called up the internal building cameras and watched with horror as the fuel pooling under the craft came closer and closer to the sparking and sputtering fire devouring his home for the past century. He railed at Primus and The Pit, at himself, at his former partner, all while watching the glowing pink pool inch ever-closer to the chaotic leaping blaze.

He was able to wax philosophical. His world had already gone to scrap. At least he would have one more chance to see the spark extinguished from a sentient being in realtime. That it was to be him hardly mattered at this point. His demise was inevitable and he was determined to enjoy every sensor-shattering, fiber-shredding moment of it. Death in all its forms was glorious, surely his own would be the most magnificent yet? Certainly he deserved no less.

He made sure all his cameras and sensors were targeted onto the crash and his inert form. He would experience it from all angles, with every conceivable sense known to Cybertronian kind. Any nanoklik now... he hoped it would be a long and painful death.

He would have regretted that, when the explosion washed over his decayed form, his death was instantaneous.

When Buzzclaw caught up, Cybershark was quietly and urgently briefing the team against the sheer blue wall of the gigantic Autobot’s leg. “It looks like the rules of engagement have changed.” he was saying, “Lio Convoy thought they might get desperate enough to dip into their emergency energon reserves and it looks like they have. We thought we’d be doing most of the shooting but we can’t guarantee that to be the case. Watch yourselves.”

“No worries.” said Bighorn, hefting his rocket launcher, “Everyone ready for a climb?”

“You bet! Don’t worry, I know I’m first.” Ser-Ket engaged her magnetic hand and foot pads and jumped at the wall, immediately beginning to scramble up it as fast as her limbs would carry her.

“Good going,” said Survive, “Remember, Buzzclaw, you’re on rear-guard, hover around below our ascent and smoke anything that moves. Any luck, we climb to the top and you fly up to join us without anyone noticing. Oh, and for scrap’s sake, keep talking. If we don’t communicate we’re dead. Got it?”

“You got it, bossbot.” Buzzclaw transformed. Hovering a few meters off the ground he ran a systems diagnostic for about the fiftieth time since he got into the transport. Everything was working. In fact he was running with more energon in reserve than he had in cycles. His fuel pump was engex free, for once and his weapons were fully charged. It was a feeling that should have elated him, but everything felt wrong. He hadn’t been in combat...
since he’d won the Game. This wasn’t him. This was some other bot, some hero, like Lio Convoy, or even poor deluded Ser-Ket. Why was he doing this?

Buzzclaw guessed from the multitude of explosions around the drop-zone that the Builder forces had other things to occupy their time and risked extending his radar pulse a bit beyond mission parameters. The team were halfway up the gigantic robot now and progressing well; Fortress Maximus was inlaid with handholds and grips to make servicing his bulk easier. He allowed himself to hover higher, keeping up with their progress, but taking him above the relative safety of the surrounding buildings.

Immediately the situation worsened. His proximity sensor bleeped a warning as a grey, twin-rotor helicopter broke off from the fight against Lio Convoy and barreled towards him. Blaster fire whipped around him and he went evasive, spraying a canister of flak from one of his claw launchers.

Red dots appeared on his internal map as a green Micromaster joined formation with the first and prepared to stoop towards him from above. “Looks like you needed a little help, eh, Bulge?”

“If I knew it was going to be you, Windsheer, I might have handled this upstart myself.”

Buzzclaw was about ready to panic. He squawked a distress signal to Ser-Ket’s personal transmitter but found to his horror that the climbing team were also engaged. Ports had appeared in Fortress Maximus’ side and Micromaster guards were pouring shot after shot at the climbers. They were pinned down.

He tried to think of similar situations he had seen in Games. The other flyers outnumbered him, but were not good shots. Lio Convoy’s seemingly unstoppable attack had rattled them. He still had a flak canister left, perhaps if he...

Wishing very hard he had a second option, Buzzclaw engaged his thrusters, straight towards the newcomer, who had taken the lead. Two streams of blaster fire converged where he had been a second ago, spattering molten pellets from Fortress Maximus armor plating. He counted, one... two... on three he was practically level with his rival.

Buzzclaw fired. The flak canister twirled towards Windsheer and exploded practically in her canopy, which after Buzzclaw’s charge was just a fraction of a mechanometer from his own. The difference was he knew it was coming. The enemy flyers had no such forewarning. Buzzclaw’s last second transformation had sent him plummeting towards the ground. They were still hovering as the ordnance exploded in the midst of their formation, tearing smoking holes in their rotors and blasting them in all directions. As he fought back an unwelcome blast of corrosive vomit, Buzzclaw forced himself to concentrate on transforming back into flight mode. Seconds from the ground, he managed to reconfigure his limbs with a speed he had never before managed. He sucked as much power into his flight systems as he dared, and hurtled back towards the rest of the team. Only then did he remember Survive’s instructions, “I’ve destroyed two flyers,” he said in something approaching triumph. Trying desperately to keep to protocol he cast his sensors around “There is, I think, a ground team coming from, errr.” he checked his compass, “The west.”

Raddled by static, the burly Maximal’s voice barely made it through, “Can you do anything? We’re heavily engaged.”
That isn’t good for you. The thought popped into his head unbidden.

“Not sure Survive, I’m pretty exposed out here.” He hovered, aching from a hundred scrapes where the flak had glanced off his armor. He was still trying to make up his mind about what to do when his comm buzzed again.

“For scrap’s sake! I’ll do it myself!” Buzzclaw watched in horror as a long-limbed, anfractuous form detached from Fortress Maximus and hurtled towards the ground, vanishing in a blaze of energy as battle was joined by the onrushing Builders.

“Corahda, no!” Ser-Ket sounded utterly panicked. “What’s he doing?”

“Un-knot your fanbelts guys, this is what I do!” There were a tense few seconds and then, “There’s a lot of them down here. Buzzclaw for frag’s sake, one team? This is more like a brigade! Why didn’t you....?” There was a burst of static and he was gone.

“Corahda, Corahda, come in!” Cybershark’s voice cut through the static, “Damn it! He’s gone. Buzzclaw get here, we need you right now!”

Better do what he says. Unless you can think of a better plan. Another errant thought. The combat was making him jittery, he mused. He buzzed towards the others, stowing his claw launchers and selecting the more workmanlike blaster mode. Removing everything but targeting data from his HUD he was able to snipe two of the Micromasters before they realized they were flanked. He dodged erratically as they turned to fire at him, but even if it was more by luck than judgment, it was what his colleagues needed.

Ser-Ket disengaged the magnets in her hands, leant sideways, and started to run at a ninety degree angle to the ground. Her shoulder-wheels extended for balance. One guard saw her and managed to hole a tire, but nothing vital was damaged. Into the first two hatches she dropped energon charges. The portals closed as the guards instinctively ducked inside to find the timed explosives. Muffled detonations and a thick pall of smoke showed they had failed.

With the third hatch she needed no weapons. Talons fully deployed, teeth bared, she hooked the unlucky black and purple Micromaster underneath the arms and hurled him into space. He screamed on all frequencies as he hurtled towards the ground, obviously not possessed of a flight mode. Ser-Ket strained to keep the hatch open but it snapped shut, hermetically sealed when its occupant departed. They were no longer under fire, but the climb was barely over half done. They continued inexorably upwards, the fires illuminating the city and the gargoyle shapes of Tarn’s Builders growing smaller and more remote with every nano-klik. Buzzclaw hovered nearby, given status updates as best he could, while the others climbed, laboriously, hand over hand.

Before too long they were at shoulder level. Buzzclaw was flying around one of the enormous cannons that had been designed to fight bots as big or bigger than Fortress Maximus himself. He could barely believe such a thing had been conceived, let alone fired. A Cybertron that could spend that much fuel in a single blast was not a place he had ever called home. He transformed and landed beside the team as they reached the crenellated zenith. Before them, at least as tall as three or four modern-day Builders was a gigantic faceplate, set in a stern expression that had not changed for centuries.

Buzzclaw was almost afraid to ask. “Any sign of Corahda?”

Bighorn frowned, “Nope. Reckon he bit off a little more than even he can swallow.”

17
Ser-Ket touched his claw, “It wasn’t your fault, Buzz.”

“I know, I warned him they were coming. I couldn’t see how many! It was just like him to go off half-cocked like that.”

Bighorn snorted, “Don’t know who else’s fault it would’ve been then. Give a bot false intelligence, what’s he supposed to do? Guess?”

Ser-Ket jumped between them. “You’re out of line...”

The huge Maximal squared up to her. “Out of my way, Predacon. I want to have a little chat with ‘Buzz’ here.”

Cybershark’s stern voice cut through the posturing, “Bighorn!” he admonished, touching the metal cylinder at his side, “Remember the mission.”

Grumbling, Bighorn backed off and Cybershark wasted no more time, “Ok, we’re a bot down and things are only going to get tougher. Inside there could be hundreds more of those guys and the cells are a long way down. Everyone top-off their fuel, our energy efficiency is the only advantage we have at this point.”

The word Grim intruded into his mind, as he drained the tank he had been carrying. “Way to suger-coat it...” muttered Buzzclaw.

“Got something to say?” rumbled Bighorn.

“Who, me? Of course not...” said Buzzclaw, indignantly, “Who wouldn’t want to be here?”

“That’s what I thought.” Further discourse was impossible as Ser-Ket’s excited shout announced that a team of flyers was moving in.

“That’s our cue.” said Cybershark, “Bighorn.”

“Happy to.” Bighorn raised his rocket launcher and targeted the lens of Fortress Maximus’ gigantic inert optical array. The blast shredded the eye, throwing shards of glass and targeting circuitry up in a huge cloud.

Without waiting for the smoke to clear, Cybershark grabbed the rim of the enormous eye-socket and launched himself into the darkened opening. Survive was next, then Ser-Ket, leaving Buzzclaw and Bighorn to take potshots at the approaching ornithopters.

“Get in there!” Bighorn roared, flipping his rocket launcher to full-auto and filling the sky with blasts.

“Erm...” Buzzclaw hesitated as he looked at the gaping socket which, frustratingly, his sensors refused to penetrate.

“Come on!” the huge Maximal carried on firing one-handed, grabbing Buzzclaw by the scruff of the neck he hurled him through the opening. Seconds later he followed suit, only moments ahead of a determined strafing run by one of the flyers.
Deep inside the superstructure, a troika of beings, identical but for color, lay cosseted 120 degrees apart with feet pointed out and heads close together. A thin stream of vestigial babble escaped each of their metal lips. The red being, the analytical, exemplified dispassionate ratiocination. He saw all, analyzed all, remembered all. The blue, the hindbrain, swam in a stream of fuel pumps, electrical balance, hydraulic levels, capacitor charges, and the tens of thousands of details needed to keep a living structure the size of a mountain alive. The green was a creature of emotion, intuition, language.

As the explosion rocked the eye, each reacted. “Optical breach, dexter, response team to alert status,” directed the rational brain in a clearly audible voice, though no one was present to hear. The operations consciousness murmured repair orders, rerouting energy pathways to bypass damaged circuits.

The third mind was silent for a moment. When the words were dredged up from some long-forgotten memory bank, they were a wail, a sob, a pained eulogy. “The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned.”
It took a few seconds for Buzzclaw’s optics to adjust to the interior. He found himself in a fairly spacious, although low-ceilingsed, chamber lit by a dull red glow. His team-mates were fanning out in a professional manner so he picked a direction and pointed his weapons at it.

There was no sign of movement. Protocol was once again to rely on visual tracking only. Cybershark was worried that if the guards could get an accurate lock on their signature they might be able to seal Fortress Maximus’s bulkheads and trap them, maybe forever. Buzzclaw shuddered at the notion.

It was eerie after the battle on the surface. “Anything?” he whispered.

“Nothing.” Survive replied, “Anyone else?”

“I think this is the way.” said Ser-Ket.

Cybershark checked his map, “Confirmed, let’s go.”

They went single file, Cybershark on point and Bighorn bringing up the rear. Buzzclaw kept his audio-receptors out for sounds of movement.

“I can’t believe I’m actually inside a Builder.” breathed Ser-Ket in awe.

*Technically you’re not.* Buzzclaw whipped around frantically, “Who said that?”

“What?” asked Bighorn, genuinely confused, as Cybershark plucked the gleaming canister from his belt and fiddled with the settings.

“Nothing I guess.”

Ser-Ket regarded him curiously and they continued in silence.

The corridor opened out into another massive chamber. This one was filled with machinery that any cyber-surgeon would be able to identify, just scaled up to the nth degree, pumps and ducts and hydraulic pistons. Buzzclaw realized this was what his innards must look like and shuddered.

*Nothing to be scared of.*

“What?”

*We’ve all got them.*

Buzzclaw glanced hurriedly right to left. “Seriously, who’s talking?”

“Not me.” said Survive amiably.

“What’s wrong, Buzz?” Ser-Ket looked genuinely concerned.

“Nothing, let’s get on with it.”

The first attack came two levels down. Buzzclaw was almost beginning to believe they had gone completely unnoticed when a squad of three Micromasters appeared as if by magic from a false bulkhead. He worked hard...
on locking down his emotional subroutines as he dived desperately for cover in the face of these heavily-armed newcomers, each of whom had an integrated weapon larger than Buzzclaw’s thigh.

Survive was first into the fray. As calm in battle as out of it, he pinned down the lime-green Builder with a huge shoulder-mounted cannon, before riddling the yellow one with cannons for arms full of bullets at point blank range. As he did this, Cybershark was laying down a covering fire, blasting a two-wheeled foot from the last Micromaster, a dun cyclops with a missile launcher in place of his right arm.

The pinned mechanoid struggled free of Survive’s servos, staring in horror at the remains of his companions. “Bomb... Shock...” He turned and aimed his enormous weapon at Cybershark and then stopped with a confused look on his face. Energon and hydraulic fluid began to leak from his mouth as Ser-Ket’s claws emerged from his chest and tore him asunder. Three more Micromasters rounded the corner, sharing body types with those just felled and sporting similar Decepticon badges.

Look at them.

“Huh?”

Really look at them. They don’t need you.

“Of course they do.” but Buzzclaw wasn’t so certain. “They picked me.”

“Stop jabbering and help me!” Bighorn roared, grappling with a brown and orange version of the one-eyed Builder.

Buzzclaw realized he hadn’t moved since the battle started. Trembling horribly, he just about managed to gather the presence of mind to shoot green tank rumbling towards Ser-Ket. It wasn’t a good shot, only a glancing blow off one of the twin missile-launchers, but it gave Ser-Ket enough time to recover and plunge her teeth deep into the tank’s innards and its treads stopped rolling.

“Keep moving!” Cybershark yelled, hurtling towards a yellow six-wheeled tank as he dodged its enormous discharge of focused plasma. “And keep firing.”

“I’m getting a huge energon signature,” Survive warned. “I don’t think this place is as dead as we thought!”

Sure enough, the corridor started to shift under Buzzclaw’s feet. He hadn’t room to transform, so had to follow it as best he could as the plates rearranged themselves and enormous gears emerged from the wall, threatening to grind him to filings.

“Wait, wait!” he called frantically, as Bighorn disappeared behind a bulkhead that hadn’t been there a moment before.

A trio of guards vaulted from a concealed shaft and blasted at Buzzclaw. He managed to duck the shots and bring his first ion disc to bear. Automatically seeking the target it hummed as it split the air, removing a black and gold cyclops’s cranial unit and rapidly changing direction, plunging into the blue-grey shoulder-cannon type’s back and coating all three in a spattering of oil. The third guard, an umber-with-black-camo missile-arm type, was so surprised that Buzzclaw was able to shoot him dead without much difficulty. He retrieved the disc, but when he turned round, the corridor was facing a different direction and he was utterly alone.
Buzzclaw flicked between as many frequencies as he could but was only rewarded with oppressive static. The unexpected reformatting of the corridor had played havoc with his internal navigation software. His in-optic map had a big red symbol on it warning him not to trust it. Absent a better option, Buzzclaw picked a direction and began to edge slowly into the gloom.

Fortress Maximus had not been well cared for. The corridor was streaked with rust and grime, cables hung lifeless from broken duct work and burnt out conduits. The stern, red face of Autobot oppression stared at him from every fifth bulkhead. Buzzclaw was no student of history but even he got a little sad when he thought about the hope it used to represent.

The corridors became ever more twisted and illogical. Fortress Maximus’ internal transformation trick must have been incomplete, because there was no way he was supposed to fit together this way. At one point Buzzclaw was sure he was walking below a ceiling that five minutes before had been a floor. He tried to check his sensor logs, but it was still useless.

Eventually a round door slid back with a grinding sound and he found himself in a domed room. The walls were black, with polished silver Autobot symbols inlaid into the metal work. The only objects in the room were three large slabs, upright, about Buzzclaw’s height. The light was faint, but steady, glowing a rich blue which complemented the polished obsidian. Somehow the ravages of age and neglect had spared this barren chamber.

“Hello!” he called out, without knowing why. There was no answer.

Buzzclaw picked his way across the room. As he crossed a faint blue light he became aware of a sick feeling in his equilibrium circuits. His HUD fritzed and abandoned him completely. He was down to pure visual confirmation. It was then that he realized why the room was so clean. There was a low level stasis field in operation and must have been for centuries.

Even Buzzclaw would admit that he had to dig deep to find the spirit of revolution in his spark but the idea that the Builders were running such a power-intensive device for so long with no clear purpose made him remember all the times he had shuffled to the depot on half auxiliary power just to get through the morning. That had changed after his big win, of course, but the memories didn’t go away completely, even if engex could be relied upon to blunt them somewhat.

Go on, ask.

That voice again. No-one else had heard it before and he had managed to convince himself it was a bug in his overtaxed sensory matrix. Here he was though, at the center of a stasis field, with nothing but his basic cameras and microphones for input.

“What is this place?”

Good question, but that isn’t what you wanted to ask.

“Who are you?”

Another good question, albeit one you suspect you know the answer to. Ask what you REALLY want to know.

An uncharacteristic surge of honest came over Buzzclaw. There was no-one else around to hear him and, for once, it felt cathartic to admit he was scared.
“Am I going to survive this?”

That really depends on you.

The voice wasn’t giving him much to work with but he resolved to keep talking to it, trying not to let on that his hard drive was practically fragmenting with anxiety.

“Where are the others?”

Deeper. In trouble. Would you like to hear them?

“No.” Buzzclaw started to say, but apparently he wasn’t going to be given the option. The stasis field lessened slightly as the transmission forced its way past his signal dampeners. Deafened, he fell to his knees. A frantic voice shredded through his audio-receptors, it took until the signal stabilized for Buzzclaw to realize that it was Ser-Ket.

“There’s more of them this way! I’m low on power! Buzzclaw? Has anyone seen Buzzclaw?”

“Survive, I’m cut off.” Calm but troubled tones—it had to be Cybershark, “I can’t get to Ser-Ket and I can’t see Bighorn.”

“Talk to me, follow my transmission.” Survive’s worried tones, “I think the corridor’s moved. I can’t...”

“They’re everywhere! Where do they keep coming from?” Ser-Ket again, asking a question nobody was in a position to answer.

“That’s enough!” Buzzclaw managed to force the words out, and then more quietly, “They’re dying.”

Undoubtedly. The question is, do you care?

Did he? Certainly Ser-Ket was the only one of the team who even seemed to like him.

“Yes, of course. I want to help them.”

Of course you do. That’s all you do. The voice rasped out a dry chuckle. Permit me another indulgence, if you would?

“I don’t think I have a choice.” Buzzclaw wanted it to sound defiant, but it came out petulant.

Everyone always has a choice. Even you. You’ll learn that in time.

Once again Buzzclaw collapsed as he felt the virus signal blow through his firewalls like so much tinfoil. Buzzclaw screamed.

He opened his optics and found they weren’t his own. Blinking in confusion he realized that there were four Micromasters baring down on him, shock-prods charged.

Unbidden, he brought an arm up and disarmed the first, expertly twisting the prod to stab it through the next faceplate. Employing a Polyhexian wrestling pin he slammed the first guard to the floor, twisted his hand free and used it to punch the third guard in the chest. Subtly applied pressure overloaded the shock-prod and it exploded, catapulting the bot into the one behind.
That’s a shame. Said the voice. That was the Race Track Patrol—they were always loyal to me, despite their Decepticon heritage.

Buzzclaw couldn’t answer as he was forced to concentrate entirely on the recording playing out before his eyes. Two more guards, swords in hand, dropped from above. His own blade ejected from its wrist mounting and parried the first, throwing the gray Micromaster off-balance before plunging deep into the second’s spark chamber. The Builder sputtered to lifelessness instantly, but the blade was caught, so he willed the manual release and left it in the corpse.

He whirled to face the other sword-wielder, bringing his left arm up, opening up his palm and ejecting a stream of electrically charged venom. The bot froze and sparked, collapsing as the fluid overloaded his circuitry.

A noise from behind demanded his attention. Buzzclaw whirled round and found himself face to face with a very large blaster barrel. The transmission died as the guard fired, blasting Buzzclaw back to reality. He curled into a shivering ball, trying to fight the primal impulse to transform for no good reason.

And so passed Corahda, taking with him Dirt Digger and Spark Grid, Motorhead and Roller Force, Ground Hog and Barricade, the voice chuckled, Did you enjoy that?

“What are you?”

The better question is, “What was he?” A hero? A lone wolf? And what, my dear Buzzclaw, are you? A gambler? A tox-addict? A cheat?

That was the one that got him back on his feet, “I won that Game fair and square!”

Did you? You never doubted it? Strange... I’m pretty sure my scanning software detected a flicker of doubt. It’s rarely wrong.

“The results are a matter of public record.”

Another chuckle, Oh my dear Buzzclaw. Public record under a dictatorship? Surely you’re not that naive?

Buzzclaw had had enough of people telling him or was surely one thing or another. “Shut up! It’s not like any of that matters now.”

Doesn’t it? So why didn’t you ask him?

Buzzclaw paused, “Ask who what?”

Lio Convoy. Why didn’t you ask him whether your match was one of the ones he... influenced?

Buzzclaw went quiet. “I think I’d like to go now.”

He turned and looked for the exit. Before he could move, ancient gears began to grind and he found that the floor was forcibly rotating him away from it. He made to transform, but the stasis field wouldn’t allow it

Convoy didn’t think, did he, of the effect he was having? He didn’t think about poor Buzzclaw, how his one achievement in a lifetime of mediocrity could be swept away by a single indisputable fact. He was living a lie.
Have you ever considered the connectedness of our lives? The voice continued, as though this had been their conversation all along. I have thought of nothing but. All day, every day, we meet people, we influence them with our actions, our words, we leave trails of data everywhere we go. It's impossible to leave your front door without affecting someone else. Lio Convoy has set events in motion that will affect everyone on this planet. You, Buzzclaw, have a decision to make, but before you do, it's important that you understand what the stakes are.

Buzzclaw made a determined effort to ignore the voice, but it continued without his acknowledgment. He felt something overheat inside and reached up to touch his face, only to wipe away a thin trail of coolant leaking from the gasket surrounding his optics. “Why don’t you stop?”

I was a pacifist once. Believe that if you will. I realized the cosmic cancer that Cybertron had become. What a sick joke. A race who possessed the secret of immortality, so bent on annihilating one another over petty differences that we dragged hundreds, thousands of other worlds into our war. Lives shattered, communities bombed into nothingness. For centuries I preached peace and tolerance, believing that was the only way out of the madness. That we had to understand one another to end the war.

“The war ended.”

Yes, and I had no small part to play in that. As the centuries dragged on and the desperation grow steadily worse, I realized I was the only one left who believed words could make things right. I saw a planet devastated around me, people I cared about murdered, personal losses you could scarcely imagine. This body was thrust upon me and, Primus help me, I acquiesced. This Fortress Maximus is no more a Builder than the transport that brought you hear is part of you. Permit me to introduce myself. My name is Cerebros.

Buzzclaw groped around in his memory banks, locked onto a name, “The Scouring of Nebulos.”

Ser-Ket’s systems had been running well above normal tolerances for over a megacycle. She had lost count of the amount of Micromasters the team had deactivated since the fight started but she was covered in mech-fluid. She couldn’t tell how much of it came from her enemy and how much from the deep gashes in her armor plating. Despite their size advantage, it was clear the Builders were running with fuel tanks perhaps a quarter full, whereas her team was fully charged. At least, they had been at the start of the conflict.

The Micromasters appeared to have fallen back for now so she rejoined the others, who were having an impromptu conference. “Hey, any sign of Buzzclaw?”

“He’ll turn up,” Bighorn didn’t seem concerned, just annoyed.

“Yes, I’m sure he’s safe somewhere.” said Survive, absently.

“Aren’t we going to look for him?” she asked, incredulous.

“We have to push on with the mission.” Cybershark said firmly. “Buzzclaw knew the risks.”

Did he? wondered Ser-Ket, Did any of us? Is it my fault for persuading him to come along?

“Come on.” said Bighorn, “Charge weapons and lets go. Buzzclaw’s great at looking out for himself. He’ll catch up.”
Cerebros was still talking: *When Nebulos was first imperiled, I was given no choice but to fight. Human arrogance dragged me into the conflict without seeking permission or consent. This city-form was unleashed on a universe that could barely contain it. Thousands fell to my guns, hundreds crushed beneath my treads. I was more than a one-bot army, I was a holocaust given form.*

*Me, and other bots like me, were among the main reasons the armistice was imposed on us. Nobody could fight a war for long that included those such as us. We were left with a choice; I was left with a choice. Fight the humans, who had surpassed us so long ago and saw the devastation of Nebulos and said “never again,” or accept de facto surrender, learn to live with ourselves as one society. I, who had been bonded to three successive generations of humans who had missed the Terran Singularity and allied themselves with Cybertron, who had watched them shuffle off their mortal coils, could not raise arms against the Human Confederacy, and was a signatory of the accord. And this is where we come full circle, Buzzclaw because I am granting you the same choice that I had to make, centuries ago.*

Buzzclaw shouted at the vaulted ceiling, at his unseen lecturer, his head pounding as internal diagnostics reported gateway breaches on his neural-net and his ICE attempted to counter. “You keep saying that! What is this choice?”

*I saw what Cybertronian society was becoming, dried up, useless, a pit of corruption and stagnation, and I had the means to do something about it. Had I wished to intervene, to conquer the planet, or spearhead assaults on other worlds to claim energon, few could have challenged me. The Titans, perhaps, but they were long lost. Perhaps even Trypticon, but he never liked a fight he wasn’t sure of winning.*

The slow, steady rhythm of Cerebros’s speech was oddly... calming. Despite himself, Buzzclaw felt his optics starting to slide closed and had to shake his head to stay in the moment.

*When I learned of the Lazarus Society, and their mission to populate the stars with the hundred thirty billion humans who had died before the Singularity made the humans as immortal as we, I broke protocol and contacted Earth. They refused my request, the restoration of those who had taken so much from me, offered so much to me, become... me. But they granted a boon, a new font of life to replace Vector Sigma. I was apprehensive, but wanted to allow my race some kind of future. Hence, the successor race of the Autobots, my namesakes, the Maximals. I insisted that the Decepticons, too, be granted a future. I had hopes that these new races might coexist in harmony, with each other, with the humans.*

The calming voice continued, and Buzzclaw could do nothing but listen.

*But the Assembly saw only the means to perpetuate ancient hatreds. For a time it appeared that the war would be renewed. When the Games began I sighed with relief that the arenas would be so limited. I had lived for millennia, and most of that time all I had seen was death. I was sure of my pacifism now more than I ever had been before I fired my first shot in anger. Cybertronians were too dangerous to be anything other than safely contained. As I predicted, the energon dried up, the petty conflict between Maximal and Predacon played out, safely, in the coliseums that were once cities and I watched, and I waited, as Cybertron forgot about the universe and we contented ourselves with our dead planet and the husk of a stellar empire. At least, I thought, our legacy of conquest and destruction could begin to be repaired.*

“Lio Convoy stopped all that,” Buzzclaw slurred. As the words left his mouth, the pain in his cranium started to
ebb. Realization crept into his voice. “If the resistance overthrows the Builders, you don’t know what is going to happen.”

*On the contrary, I know exactly what is going to happen. Cybertron will look to the stars once again, and Lio Convoy will be leading the crusade. Whether he means for this or not, the outcome is inevitable.*

“And why is this my choice?” Buzzclaw asked, pointedly, “You’ve already told me what a tox-addled waste of space I am. What do I care about the stars?”

*You do not, and I have not fooled myself into thinking you would. Consider this, for a moment, however; this assault was the third that Lio Convoy’s group have attempted on my superstructure.*

Buzzclaw was stunned, “What?”

*Indeed. Interesting detail for them to leave out, wouldn’t you say? Two previous attempts, two dismal failures. I could play you the combat logs, if you’d like...*  

“No.. just... no.” Buzzclaw’s neural net convulsed with new data. Why wouldn’t Lio, or Cybershark have told him?  

*Clearly they didn’t trust you. I wonder why that would be?*  

“It doesn’t matter.”

*Doesn’t it? Time for that choice, Buzzclaw.*

The room shifted and morphed, plates with joins he hadn’t even seen a moment before split apart and reconfigured. The black slabs remained intact, sliding past him as his optical array automatically translated the laser-engraved runes on their surface. *Spike Witwicky, Daniel Witwicky, Galen Witwicky.*

Buzzclaw found himself in a corridor that ran parallel to another, similar one. To his surprise, through a sequence of windows, he could see the other four resistance members, battered, leaking mech-fluid, seemingly unsure of their next move.

*They are taking a terrible toll on my internal defenses. I’m going to beat them. I always do, but good, loyal bots are dying every second they continue. The question is, do you want to die with them, or will you help me extinguish a few so Lio Convoy’s misguided reign can end before it has really begun?*  

Lio Convoy’s face swam, unbidden before his optics. *Why didn’t I ask him? Why didn’t he tell me? Was the status quo really so bad? Were those his thoughts, or Cerebros’? And why didn’t it bother him that he couldn’t tell the difference anymore? The ending is inevitable. Their destruction is assured.*  

The Builder’s argument pushed itself inexorably into his mind, and yet there was a scintilla of doubt left. Ser-Ket was his friend. Ser-Ket believed in him. “Looks to me like they’re winning.”

*A temporary illusion. They will fall in time, as the others have. If you help me, though, they can be spared. Ser-Ket can be spared.*  

Something within him sagged, collapsed. “What do you need me to do?”

*Simple. Just tell them you have found the prison block, lead them to the co-ordinates I give you and my internal reconfiguration can trap them.*  

Already the miasma was lifting. This was easier, simpler, safer, better for everyone, really. “And what if they don’t follow me?”

27
You’ll know what to do.

Buzzclaw, found that he did indeed know what to do. The corridor reconfigured, allowing him access to his compatriots, the words of Cerebros rattling around his cortex and his disks prepped to launch as an unnatural warmth flushed through his circuitry.

The panel slid back and revealed Buzzclaw. Ser-Ket felt tension wane from her exoskeleton as he stepped forward. He looked... relieved, as if a weight had been lifted. As if he’d found peace. “Guys!” he said, “I’ve found...”

His words were cut off as Cybershark swung the small canister savagely at Buzzclaw’s head, a vicious blade springing from its innards the instant before impact. His optics widened and a trickle of fluid leaked from the corner of his mouth.

Ser-Ket howled, “Cybershark! What the frag?”

The mission leader pressed a button and arcs of sickly green energy pulsed through Buzzclaw’s still-twitching body. Then a slow, rumbling scream began to fill the corridors as the walls themselves cried out in agony. “He’d been turned. Fortress Maximus had gotten to him.”

Ser-Ket was beside herself, “Wha... how...?”

Cybershark’s face was impassive. “Because he always gets to someone and that’s why these missions always fail.”

Survive patted her sadly on the wing. “I’m sorry my dear, but it’s true. We knew this time we needed an edge and Buzzclaw was it.”

Bighorn was less kind, “The bot had so much baggage you could see it from Luna Two. If anyone was going off the deep end, it was going to be him.”

Ser-Ket stood open-mouthed as Cybershark removed the canister from Buzzclaw’s battered cranial unit. The Maximal thumbed the keypad on the side of the device until he found the fresh line of code he was looking for and scanned it into the databanks of his own onboard computer. “This is it. Buzzclaw found Cerebros’ control room. If we take that out, Fortress Maximus is dead and we’re home free.”

“What? Are we none of us going to talk about this? You just murdered one of our own!” Ser-Ket was furious, her voice come out as a shriek.

“He wasn’t one of our own, not any more.” said Cybershark, quietly.

“If he ever was.” Bighorn muttered.

Cybershark held up a hand for silence as he studied a readout only he could see. “I’ve got it.” he said, “Bighorn, here are the co-ordinates, if you would be so kind.”

Bighorn transformed into juggernaut mode, filling the passageway with his armored width. With the team
following behind he surged forward.

Following Cybershark’s decoded map they made quick progress, Ser-Ket could barely get her bearings before Cybershark announced, “this is it,” and Bighorn converted back into robot mode.

The control room was much more mundane than Ser-Ket had expected, after the baroque architecture of the last megacycle. It was a modern looking gray room, with equipment designed to be operated by beings of Maximal or Predacon size. Three minute Builders, Cyberdroids even smaller than Micromasters, were wired into three equally-spaced crèches. They were twitching occasionally, overloaded by whatever Cybershark had done to Buzzclaw.

“This is it?” she asked, “I thought Cerebros was some kind of Builder.”

Cybershark nodded, “He was, back in the day. Cerebros’ body died a long time ago. What’s left is...” He gestured at the three spindly forms.

“Meet Gran, Plasma, and Kord.” said Cybershark. He started to work one of the consoles.

Bighorn grabbed the green Cyberdroids and yanked her from the nook. Her eyes fluttered open, and she regarded them defiantly.

“What are you?” Ser-Ket asked, dangerously.

“I am Plasma, but I’m also Galen, and Spike, and Daniel. I am Cerebros, who is Zebres, who is Emissary. I am male, and I am female. I am compassion and horror. I am my own father, grandfather, son. I am Gasket and Grommet, who are Cog, who is Koka and Onomisu. I am wisdom and grief. My wife is my mother is the daughter of my enemy is bonded to my opposite. I am Gasket and Grommet, who are Cog, who is Koka and Onomisu. I am wisdom and grief. My wife is my mother is the daughter of my enemy is bonded to my opposite. I am human and Nebulon, Cyberdroid and Macromaster and Megamaster. I am death and I am life. I am Fortress Maximus! WE–” the sweep of her hand encompassed the blue and red droids still attached to the mainframe, “–are Fortress Maximus. We are–”

Bighorn gave her violent shake and she ceased her babble.

Survive took a step towards Ser-Ket and placed a servo on her shoulders. “Take a bot who is literally designed to become the brain module of another bot and add several lifetimes of experience and you’ve got someone who is really, really good at getting inside someone else’s head. Magnify that raw talent via a neural net as large as a warehouse and you’ve got a powerful psychic weapon. Buzzclaw would have thought he was betraying us through his own free will, but bit by bit, these bots were consuming his mind.”

“So Cybershark had to kill him? Right there and then?” Ser-Ket growled.

“He really did, I’m afraid,” Survive said kindly, “He would have tried to lure us into a trap and even if we hadn’t followed him, projections are that he would have self-destructed and destroyed the whole corridor. But his connection went both ways, allowing us to strike directly at the nexus of Fortress Maximus’ controls. It’s why everything shut down.”

Ser-Ket was stunned, wished she could take comfort in that revelation, but it didn’t mean anything now.

“Found them,” said Cybershark, “We were right. He’s here. They all are. Bring her over here” Awkwardly Bighorn and Cybershark forced the Cyberdroid’s data jack into the console, her flailing limbs too atrophied to provided any resistance.

“Cell doors are open. The Micromasters are reacting but there won’t be enough of them, not with this base dead. I think we’ve done it.”

“Good, do what needs to be done.”
Panic flashed in Plasma’s eyes. “Not in lone splendor hung aloft at night,” she pleaded cryptically.

Bighorn crushed the little bot’s cranial unit, then put a bullets into her blue compatriot still seizing in his berth. The red he slung over his shoulder, ignoring the susurru of meaningless facts spewing from his semi-conscious form.

Ser-Ket barely felt the explosion from the charges they left behind.

By the time they reached the prison levels, occupying both of Fortress Maximus’s massive legs, the battle was long done and the Micromasters had fled.

“Why!?” Ser-Ket shoved the bigger bot as hard as she could in the chest. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Lio Convoy regarded her with sad eyes, “Because you would have told him. The prisoners inside Fortress Maximus were too important. Cheetor was among their numbers, the first resistor, whom the world believed destroyed. Grimlock, the Autobot who became a Maximal. Preditron, who founded the Tripredacus Council before being usurped. Even the last of Cerebros’ Cyberdroids, Gran, a treasure-trove of intelligence. All are vital for Cybertron’s future.”

“I don’t understand. Why not just warn me, or warn him? You all knew. You were all in on it!”

“We tried that on the second attempt, once we’d worked out what went wrong in the first. Every bot went in with full knowledge of Fortress Maximus’ mental capabilities. He used that paranoia against them. By the end they were firing on each other as Fortress Maximus looked on.”

“So you set him up. You knew he wouldn’t be able to say no, to you or to that fragging Builder!”

“Regrettably, yes. Cybershark ran some numbers and...”

“Some numbers. You reduced his entire life to probability.” Her voice had gone quiet, loaded with menace and sorrow.

“Ser-Ket, you are talking to a bot who covertly rigged the Games for decades. Who assassinated a sports announcer in cold oil just to guarantee airtime for my political message. We do what we have to, all of us. I only knew him for a short while but I know that Buzzclaw was a great believer in that.” He turned away.

“He will be dispersed with full honors. His sacrifice will not be forgotten. Even if he didn’t mean to make it.”

But she was gone, storming out of the base, unsure if she would ever return.

“How can she not understand?” Cybershark detached himself from the shadows behind the commander, “What is she doing?”

“What she thinks she has to,” said Lio Convoy, “Like all of us.”