TRANSFORMERS TIMELINES PRESENTS:

MICRO-AGGRESSIONS

A TALE FROM BEAST WARS: UPRISING

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MICRO-AGGRESSIONS

Under the scant shelter offered by the Neurospan bridge, two mechanoids huddled uncomfortably. The angry sky was expressing its discontent with the beings scurrying about beneath it by unleashing a deluge of acid rain, and few were brave enough to risk carapace and circuit under such conditions.

“This really is a miserable world, Pincher,” expressed the blue mech with black highlight. His eyes flashed an irritable green.

His blue and gold companion glanced up at him. “Patiencccce, Bladezzz, patiencccccce. The buyer should be along presssently.”

Their banter was interrupted by a loud thud and accompanying splash, as a powerful Maximal dropped from the bridge to a position only a few mechanometers from them, landing in a crouch which perfectly absorbed the impact. Acid puddles splashed in all directions, and the two startled mechs involuntarily flinched. The newcomer stood in the pouring corrosion, apparently unconcerned. It was difficult to tell; his face was covered by a golden mask which completely concealed his face. His right hand gripped a white sword, and his left clutched a double-barreled missile launcher. Thankfully, both were pointed at the ground.

Nonetheless, Bladez gasped involuntarily. “By the Master!”

The newcomer took a step forward, partially removing himself from the downpour although acid still streamed down his back. “Buyer here NOW.” He reached back, magno-clamped his gun to his back, and then held out his left palm. “G-Virus. Now.”

Pincher recovered himself and took a tentative step forward. “Payment firssst. Then we give you the—” Faster than the optic could follow, the white and gold newcomer stepped forward and grabbed Pincher by the throat, effortlessly lifting him from the ground. Pincher’s legs dangled helplessly and his claws grabbed ineffectively at the impossibly strong hydraulics of this Cybertronian. “Uuggk” was all he could say. Bladez raised his two fists and pointed them at the Maximal menacing his companion, but was unable to get a clear shot.

The commanding mech shifted his arm from left to right, and Pincher was shaken like a ragdoll. “You think me cheat you? You think me liar? Me Maximal, not Predacon, not Decepticon, not... not Autobot. Me say me pay you, ME PAY YOU. Understand?” At the last question, he pulled Pincher’s face close enough to his own that Pincher could feel the hot exhaust from under this golden mask, a mask adorned with symbolic teeth. He felt the grip relax fractionally, and then time seemed to stand still. “Me said, YOU UNDERSTAND?”

Pincher nodded frantically. “I underssstand! Bladezzz, give him the virusss.”

Bladez’ hideous face screwed into a mask of consternation. “But Hornet said—“

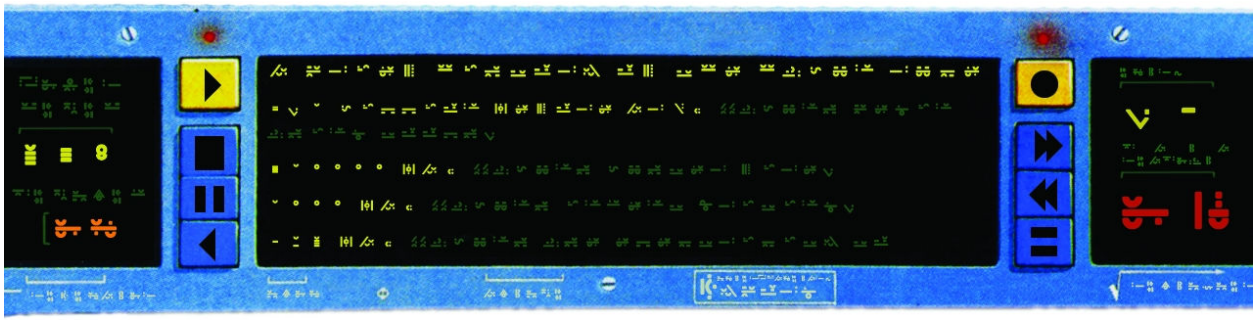
“The virusss, Bladezss, now!”

Bladez lowered his fists and produced a circuitboard in a clear case. The circuitboard gave off a sickly pink glow. Just to look at it was to feel... unclean. Bladez put the case on the ground and shoved it with his instep so that it skidded to a stop against the Maximal's golden leg. The Maximal's inscrutable mask seemed to regard Pincher for another long moment and then unceremoniously dropped him to the ground. With an easy motion he scooped up the G-Virus, and then it was gone. He turned and began walking into the corrosive night.

"Wait," cried Pincher from the ground, "what about our payment?"

The Maximal tossed them a small data cylinder without looking back. "Everything Resistance know about Human Confederation. Whatever you Preds planning, better be ready. Humans bad news." With that, he was gone.

Bladez retrieved the cylinder, wiped off the traces of precipitation, and then helped Pincher to his feet. "Come, let's get back to Scorp and the others."



Hot Rod idled his engines as he fueled up at the Gasoline Base. As his internal gauges edged towards full, he wondered what the emergency was. He, like all of the Micromasters, had been bumped up to half-rations when Lio Convoy issued his call to arms, but some new development had bumped his ration card to full, a position it hadn't been at in over a century. Whatever the crisis was, he was enjoying the sensation of being at full strength, able to fire his blasters or drive at full speed. It was glorious. Few other full-sized Autobots had made the transition to Micromaster, with the resulting decrease in social status, but Hot Rod couldn't imagine life without walking, without running, without TRANSFORMING, for Primus' sake!

Greasepit ambled over to chat. A part of Hot Rod—a small part, but a part nonetheless—still found it strange to comingle with Decepticons. He shunted it aside. He had been commanding integrated strike forces ever since he had downsized, and some of the finest troopers in his command were Decepticons. "Hey there, you been doing a lot of fill-ups recently?"

The 'Con chortled. "You're my third today, and, oh, let's see, my third since my base got parked here. You getting geared up to go hunt down Lio Convoy or somethin'?"

Hot Rod blinked his lights, his car-mode equivalent of a shrug. “Couldn’t tell you, even if I knew. Circuits crossed I’ll be back next week and maybe I can give you a hint... if you’re especially generous with my ration.”

Greasepit put his fists on his side with his elbows out and gave a hearty chuckle. “I might just do that. Do me a solid, kick some Resistance tailpipe for me. My bud Crumplezone died in their raid on Fortress Maximus. I’m itchin’ for some payback.”

Internally, Hot Rod shuddered. Many of the Micromasters who died in the breakout had served under him at one point or another. The guards were not considered to be combat troops and were thus on quarter rations—they hadn’t stood a chance. He steeled his voice. “Can do, my good bot. Let me get to HQ so I can find out what the hoopla is about.”

The roar of his engine drowned out Greasepit’s reply, if any, and Hot Rod tore through the streets. He headed down the Cannon Transport Thoroughfare, past the Dai Atlas Exchange, through the Anti-Aircraft Base, and over the bridge connecting the Sky Hyper to Rocket Base, before arriving at the nerve center of his command, the Star Convoy. ‘Unfortunate name,’ he mused, not for the first time. All together, the collection of fully-transformable modules was a fully-functional Micromaster-scale city, affectionately nicknamed the Micropolis by its inhabitants.

Inside the Star Convoy, he found his command team already assembled. Countdown, Drillbuster, Blackout, and Spaceshot stood around the holographic display. It was an interesting mix of talents and egos, but it satisfied the Builder Assembly and represented most of the key stakeholders in Micropolis. Countdown pulled himself to attention and fired off a smart salute. Blackout leaned in to her sister and whispered something, causing Spaceshot to giggle. Drillbuster, characteristically, fidgeted. “OK, team, I just fueled up to full for the first time in forever. What’s the downside?” The five faces staring back at him looked bleak. “Come on, guys, it can’t be as bad as all that.”

Blackout and Spaceshot shared a conspiratorial glance. Drillbuster coughed nervously into his hand. The normally unflappable Countdown’s optics darted left and right, and he leaned in. “It can be. It is.”

“Well, don’t keep me in suspense. What’s the damage?”

Spaceshot splayed the fingers on her left hand and dimmed her optics, accessing the holographic display. A small green version of what was obviously a massive structure, bristling with guns and sensors, appeared. After a few nanokliks, a holographic explosion blew out one of the gunports and what looked to be a micro-scale gestalt tore his way out. “Last night, the Forever Vaults were successfully looted, sirah. The security footage from inside was erased, but we do have this external feed.”

A low whistle involuntarily emanated from Hot Rod's vocoder. This was bad. "What did they take? Madmachine schematics? The VX Bomb? The... oh, Primus. Not that."

As one, four heads nodded. Drillbuster reached up and scratched his nose. "Yes... that. I'm afraid the G-Virus is on the loose. And the Assembly wants it recaptured, not destroyed."

At his side, Hot Rod's fists clenched unconsciously. "Any witnesses?" he asked, already knowing the answer would be 'no'.

Countdown fielded this one. "Yes, surprisingly. They killed five of the guards, but spared one. He's in the infirmary, under First Aid's care. He was severely injured, but regained consciousness for a few cycles. Long enough for Road Police to get a statement."

The red and white Autobot handed Hot Rod a datapad, and he proceeded to skim it. The guard was a helicopter alt-mode Micromaster named Cop-Tur. He described the gestalt as "monstrous" and said that its members spared him because they "weren't sure he wasn't their Cop-Tur." They made their way straight to the G-Virus containment and smashed their way in.

Hot Rod tossed the pad angrily to the table, and it skittered to the edge where it teetered, toying with the idea of falling. "So, let me get this right. Mercenary Predacons somehow acquired gestalt technology and used it to steal the most dangerous weapon on Cybertron. This is just perfect. And I suppose the Builder Assembly wants us to track down this weapon and destroy it."

"Negative, sir," barked Countdown. "They want us to retrieve it."

"Of COURSE they do. Anyone else have any more info to brighten my day?" Hot Rod looked to each of his subordinates in turn.

Drillbuster scratched the back of his head. "Yeah, boss, just one more factoid. Black Out discovered that—"

"Any reason she's not telling me herself?" Hot Rod interrupted

Blackout gave an exaggerated roll of her head and optics. "My word. Twasn't me, sirah. Black Out, two words. Red, white, and blue radar tank, male, in charge of SIGINT with Search, who shares his body type."

Hot Rod spread his palms in an exaggerated gesture of reconciliation. "Sorry, sorry, no need to be so sensitive. I didn't hear the pause. I do now."

The room was silent for a beat, then Spaceshot leaned over and whispered something to her sister. Blackout put her hand over her mouth to cover the snickering, and Countdown shot the pair of them a stern glance, which Blackout promptly ignored. Spaceshot, at least, had the good graces to feign a sheepish look.

Drillbuster's optics darted from them to Countdown to Hot Rod before continuing. “As I was saying, it looks like the Resistance put out a bounty on the virus a couple of solar cycles ago. And...” He exhaled nervously. “...Sir... it’s Grimlock’s cell.”

The tendons in Snapper's arm strained as Barbearian pushed his hand ever-closer to the table. The Maximal's exhaust was hot on his face. His opponent grunted with effort, then taunted, "gonna ged you, you stinkin' Pred."

Enough was enough. Snapper connected his mouth to an internal duct and summoned a wad of filthy lubricant. He spat it expertly at the brown Maximal, hitting him right on the cheek. Taking advantage of the momentary confusion he summoned all of his reserves of strength and slammed Barbearian's hand to the table. "Oh yeah, that's how we Preds play." He leapt from his seat and pumped his fist in the air.

Barbearian was having none of it. He roared, then tackled Snapper, and the two were on the ground attempting to gain leverage over each other. Mach Kick, who had been standing guard, heard the commotion and ran in, admonishing both of them before they rolled into him and he went down.

Man Terror, monitoring the safehouse's computer network, heard the commotion and ran in. "You dare start a brawl without inviting the Man Terror?" he asked theatrically, then dove in with abandon. For several long moments the four of them brawled, not causing any serious damage, but perhaps not completely averse to the prospect.

Their melee was interrupted by Grimlock's booming voice. "YOU THINK THIS GAME???" Suddenly, each of the four combatants found themselves dangling off the ground, with Grimlock somehow grabbing two of them in each hand. "Me come back from getting G-Virus and find base defenseless." He shifted a couple of fingers and Mach Kick fell to the ground, landing on his skidplate. "Me think, this it, Builders find us. Then me remember you all morons."

Snapper started to protest. "Hey, we're not—" He, too, found himself flat on his back, even as Mach Kick was scrambling to his feet.

"Yes, Snapper. You moron. Man Terror moron. Barbearian and Mach Kick morons. Even me Grimlock moron. We have to be morons to fight Builders when they control so much of planet.

But me thought you my kind of moron. Not kind of moron to get into fight over cheap insults and stupid faction scrap. Not kind to abandon post."

He lowered Man Terror and Barbearian to the ground. Barbearian sheepishly helped Snapper to his feet. "You four be morons. But you my morons. So no more leaving posts. And no more fighting... until me say it time to fight."

Eagerly, Mach Kick edged forward, admiration gleaming in his optics. "And when will that be, Grimlock?"

Grimlock's optics lit up in what passed for his smile. It was not a pleasant sight. He held up the virus, its nauseating glow permeating the room. "Tomorrow."

Hot Rod paced up and down the corridors of the Star Convoy. 'Grimlock,' he fumed to himself, 'why did it have to be Grimlock?' If Hot Rod had flirted with impropriety with his body modification, Grimlock's choice was downright treasonous. Illegally transplanting his spark into a Maximal protoform, then trying to smuggle a bomb into the Builder Assembly. Certainly, his former colleague had legitimate grievances against the current, far from perfect system, but if the past eleven million years of war had taught them anything, it was that violent change begat only more violence. Grimlock's antics made it harder for Hot Rod, and those like him, to effect gradual change by working within the system, a slower but surer way to make the world a better place.

Grimlock would never understand that. He may have given up his beast mode, but his thinking was as hopelessly outdated as any dinosaur. Outdated and...

Predictable. Grimlock fancied himself quite the tactician, and he was indeed a shrewd opponent, but he had certain maxims he always followed. Strike as hard as possible, as quickly as possible, and at the target that will do the most damage. And that could only mean... the games. Councilor Ratbat had made a big deal of reassuring the public that it was business as usual despite the "unpleasantness" and was to personally oversee the first game since the Lio Convoy's theatrics. It seemed rather barbarous, pitting captured Resistance POWs against each other, which would outrage Grimlock's sense of fair play. Truth be told, Hot Rod was himself more than a little uncomfortable with the idea. But with the chance to rescue prisoners and infect a stadium full of

Builders, including a ranking member of the Builder Assembly, all in full view of the entire world, Grimlock would never be able to resist. And it was all happening tomorrow.

Hot Rod pounded his right fist into his open palm. "Grimlock," he growled, "you're going down."

The stench of the effluence pipes underneath the Tesarus Arena, the lack of cover in the oversized corridors built for mechs on a much grander scale than him, and the unending fields of detritus underfoot due to the general state of disrepair, conspired to make Snapper feel edgy. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was walking into an ambush. True, Grimlock was a living legend, and in the short time since his liberation he had led seven successful raids against Builder and MCSF operations, often deep behind enemy lines, but it was nothing like this. They were striking at the very heart of the Builders' territory, places where only the most whipped and broken Maximal and Predacon lickspittles were allowed.

Surprisingly, they weren't headed for the control room, the nerve center of any arena, certainly heavily guarded. Grimlock said that all they needed to do to succeed was reach the crowd. Man Terror noted that the virus must have been pretty potent if that was all they had to do to succeed, and Grimlock gave an expression best interpreted as a smirk, boasting that they had no idea.

Now, their goal was only cycles away. He could hear the occasional roar of the crowd as whomever the new emcee was whipped the crowd into a frenzy. Perhaps he was imagining things, but the Builder crowd seemed especially oilthirsty. Whatever the G-Virus did, it would be too good for those monsters.

From up ahead, in the point position, Mach Kick peered carefully around a corner, then beckoned them forward. Snapper, Man Terror, and Grimlock were in the middle of the pack, with Barbearian covering their backs.

Snapper's spark pulsed as he turned the corner and perceived natural starlight up ahead; the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. He unconsciously picked up his pace, eager for payback. Suddenly, Grimlock's arm shot out and halted him. Man Terror was likewise stopped.

Grimlock pitched his voice to carry without raising it. "Mach Kick, stop. Something wrong."

Their point-bot turned, incredulity plain on his face, his forward momentum not quite blunted. "But, sir, we're right here. Forty more paces—"

As if on command, on the word “paces,” he planted his foot on something that gave off a loud beep. He looked down, confused, as the mine exploded and blew him into a hundred fragments. Weapons fire began to pour through the smoke caused by his companion's sudden death.

"AMBUSH!" Snapper heard himself shout, quite unnecessarily. He started to turn around, but Grimlock's hand was still on him and he felt the grip tighten.

"Back will be worse. Forward, maybe we win." With that, Grimlock charged into the chaos.

Snapper looked at Man Terror, who gave his oversized arms a shrug. "The Man Terror says death is death." He hurtled an explosive disk into the fray, then ran after his leader. Snapper glanced behind, only to see Barbearian grappling with two bulky Micromasters. Forward it was.

In the control center, Hot Rod paced impatiently. He'd pulled in every favor he could, getting two hundred extra Micromaster guards deployed at strategic points throughout the facility, in addition to the 300 MCSF who patrolled the crowds, who reported to him through their commander, one K-9. Even better, his troops were at 3/4th power, unprecedented in this energy-starved age. Yes, they'd be more than a match for any Resistance cell in a straight fight.

The trick was finding Grimlock. If he had access to the densely-packed crowd for even an instant, the results would be catastrophic. He glanced at Blitz, the Builder hardwired into the arena controls, and hoped he was competent. Each of the control stations was manned by a bot Hot Rod trusted, but much relied on those massive datatrunks going through a minor Decepticon who hadn't so much as twitched a toe in the past hundred stellar cycles.

"Sirah," shouted Blackout from her screen, "commotion in the service tunnels, position NGS 549672. A landmine was tripped, followed by reports of weapons fire."

With a twitch of his fingers he called up a map of the facility... that position was dangerously close to the crowds. It had taken the sessile Builders days to get into position; an evacuation was out of the question. Grimlock had to be stopped before he could advance the 20 or so mechanometers to the open crowd. "Drillbuster, wait here. We can't risk this being a diversion,

so I'm keeping most of our forces in place. But have every Micromaster Patrol within two entrances send one member to that position to reinforce us. Blackout, Spaceshot, with me. Time to bury a fossil."

The crowd's noise was no longer audible over the gunfire, and the sunlight from the entrance was obscured by flame and furious black smoke, but somehow Snapper knew that he had closed nearly half the distance to exit. There were only two Micromasters who he saw in front of him; Man Terror was grappling with one, Grimlock with the other. Snapper converted to his tank configuration, took careful aim, and shot the purple and blue Micromaster in the back.

The other one, the one battling Grimlock, shrieked in agony the instant his partner was hit. "Power Punch!" he cried, before Grimlock took advantage of the distraction to punch through his armor and into the mech's innards. He grunted and twisted his arm, and the light in the Micromaster's eyes died.

"Direct-Hit," muttered Grimlock as Snapper converted back to his humanoid configuration. "Almost pun." He shook his arm and the dead Builder slid off. Grimlock still held bits of his innards in his hand.

Man Terror was less sanguine about Spittor's help. "The Man Terror needs no assistance!"

Without warning, Grimlock hurtled bits of dead Micromaster at Man Terror's head. "We all need help! We have cycles, if we lucky." He tilted his head back to Barbearian's position. "Him keeping them off our back. We do this thing now!"

Grimlock charged towards the exit, now only mechanometers away, only for a blue bomber jet with a red and yellow Micromaster improbably clutching the tailfin to shriek into the tunnel. The red Micromaster let go and tucked into a roll, springing back to his feet and taking a small bow. The bomber unleashed a barrage of fire, and Snapper barely dove for cover behind the Micromaster he had shot. Man Terror took a hit in the chest and spun around, but managed to fling one of his disks at the jet. It hurtled towards the center of the plane, and seemed certain to score a direct it, but it split in twain, becoming two blue and grey Micromaster femmes, and allowing the shot to fly harmlessly past them and explode against the ceiling. The larger of the

two, with a green face, grinned wide. "Why, Spaceshot, ah do believe these gentlemen callers are desirous of a dance."

"Well then, sister of mine, mayhaps we should tango." She raised her arms and fired off a deadly bolt of plasma which would have taken Snapper's head off if his neck hadn't reflexively retracted. He aimed his triple-barreled cannon and sprayed cover fire, hoping that Man Terror was still in the fight. He glanced around for Grimlock, but neither his boss nor the flamboyant red Builder were anywhere to be seen. He silently urged Grimlock to make haste; they would be overwhelmed soon enough.

A nanoklik after Hot Rod landed (really a rather dashing landing, if he was being objective) Grimlock barreled into him. He expected little else; Grimlock always went for the flashiest target, which was why he presented himself as such. His Micromaster body was at full power, so he should have been more than a match for any Maximal.

In theory.

In practice he found himself pressed up against the wall, with blow after blow raining into his midsection. Despite his nominally superior strength, he found himself unable to effectively block the onslaught. He raised his left arm at the elbow and fired his exhaust-pipe guns, knocking Grimlock back a few precious mechanometers. Hot Rod leaned against the wall, attempting to catch his equilibrium. "Still a savage creature, I see."

A white sword appeared in Grimlock's hand. "Still pompous twit, me see." Grimlock angled the sword to deflect Hot Rod's next energy blast, then rushed forward with unexpected speed. Pain lanced through Hot Rod as he found himself impaled through his lower abdomen. Acting more on instinct than thought, he pulled both feet up, allowing the sword to support his weight, and kicked Grimlock back. The large mech stumbled, and Hot Rod took the opportunity to blast the sword at point-blank range, shattering it. He was wounded, but still in the fight. "That all you got, traitor?"

A pair of galaxial rockets was his answer. Hot Rod dove to the ground and transformed, barely avoiding them. His opponent's gravelly voice floated out of the darkness. "Traitor? That rich. You wear Autobot badge but spit on everything it stand for. How can you support Games, slave races, parasite Builders?"

Hot Rod turned on his brights and got a bead on Grimlock, blinding the stubborn mech for a moment as a bonus. He kicked into gear and drove towards the former Dinobot at full speed, then at the last second turned hard and allowed momentum to carry his back end into Grimlock's leg, hard, knocking him into a side tunnel. "You think I don't hate it? Exploiting the Maximals and the Predacons like that? We should be following in their footsteps, downsizing. But you'll never accomplish that with guns and bombs." He shifted back to his robot form and leapt on top of Grimlock, bracing his right elbow as he did so and landing hard on the Maximal's throat. "Me, I'm leading by example. And I've gotten traction. The Aerialbots, the Protectobots, even the Constructicons all downsized."

Grimlock converted to his armored car mode and roared down the maintenance shaft, and it was all Hot Rod could do to hang on. "Yeah, you downsize, use less power. You real hero. What your thanks? Quarter rations?" Hot Rod skidded to Grimlock's left side, so he swerved left and slammed Hot Rod into a wall. Hot Rod felt more vital circuits crack as his armor took the impact. He tried to position his exhaust guns, but Grimlock swerved into the wall again, disrupting the shot. "You have seventy years, try to fix system from inside. All that time, things get more fragged, not less. Your way cycles hot exhaust."

As Grimlock prepared to slam him into the wall a third time, Hot Rod let go, converting back to his car mode as he hit the ground. Grimlock's alt mode was more armored, but his was more maneuverable. "Fine, my way is slow, but your way, your way was pioneered by none other than

Megatron himself." He dropped a gear and sped around Grimlock's right side, then let loose an oil slick. Grimlock careened out of control and smashed into a pillar. Hot Rod converted to robot mode and cautiously approached the heap. "Say you kill all the Builders, what kind of society could you possibly—"

A hand shot out of the side of the car, pulling Hot Rod to the ground even as Grimlock completed his transformation. They rolled together on the ground, grappling and punching. "Better than this!" he shouted, as he landed a blow on Hot Rod's face. Hot Rod responded by punching him in his ruined chest, destroyed when he impacted one of the arena's pillars.

With power too low to use his weapons, Hot Rod did his best to make ruined servos and smashed actuators continue the fight. "You've always gone too far, Grimlock!"

Grimlock was clearly as injured as Hot Rod, if not worse. Even as the former Dinobot tried to get fingers around Hot Rod's throat, his left thumb and index finger fell off. "And you never go too far enough, 'Chosen One'!"

They rolled together, and the roar of the crowd cascaded over the pair of them. His optics—when did they get cracked?—perceived the glory of the Cybertronian night sky. They had exited the tunnel. Row after row of immobile Builders sat in the enormous arena's seats, oblivious to their presence as they watched Maximals and Predacons killing each other for sport. Grimlock was in position to unleash his weapon.

As this awful realization dawned on Hot Rod, he felt himself pulled off of Grimlock by a green and red Predacon.

"The Man Terror cannot be defeated," shouted the green Predacon as he waved Spaceshot's arm over his head like a trophy. This was a particularly foolish move, as it prompted Blackout to break cover and blast him with twin missiles, blowing him in half.

Fortunately, Snapper was ready to take advantage of her momentary lapse of judgment and blast her with his triple-barreled gun. Her armor absorbed most of the impact, and she turned to him with a look of hatred on her emerald face. In desperation, he tilted his aim up and fired at the ceiling above her head. His gambit paid off; large chunks of solar-concrete fell from the ill-

maintained ceiling and she was buried in a pile of rubble. He doubted she was offlined for good, but out of the fight was out of the fight, as was her dismembered sister groaning on the ground.

He advanced, scarcely daring to believe he had made it to the objective, only to see two hideously damaged mechs tearing at each other on the floor of the seats of the arena. Grimlock and the other one, and neither of them looked like they could so much as stand. Neither seemed aware of his presence, so he plucked the Builder off his boss, and threw him against the nearby transparent aluminum separating the Game from the macabre spectators.

Grimlock's optics focused on him. "You... Snapper, you survive? Good bot! Take G-Virus, finish what we start." Grimlock's tortured chest whirred and clicked and—somehow—managed to open a compartment. Inside was the virus. Snapper lifted it reverently, then attached it to his weapon and took aim at the nearest Builder, an orange-and-black tiger striped winged mech with an empurata-type lens for a head.

The red Micromaster weakly raised a hand. "Grimlock... Grimlock never told you what the G-Virus is gonna do, did he?"

Snapper turned to the Builder. "He told me enough. It'll massacre them." He turned back to his target.

The Builder had the audacity to laugh. "Not exactly. Who's the worst Builder? The worst of the worst?"

Despite himself, Snapper turned again to the Builder... and Autobot, for what it was worth. "What are you getting at?"

Grimlock weakly propped himself up on a ruined elbow. "Don't listen to Builder lies, Snapper. Just finish!"

Snapper's optics darted from the Builder to Grimlock to his target. "Boss, what does this virus actually do?"

"WE NOT HAVE TIME FOR THIS!" Grimlock attempted to get to his feet but faltered, stumbling.

"He doesn't want you to know," chuckled the red mech. "Go on, answer. Every protoform knows the answer. Worst Builder. Worst Cybertronian. Doomed our race."

Snapper pointed the gun at the Builder. "Galvatron. The mad tyrant. Spawn of Unicron, destroyer of worlds, breaker of oaths."

The Builder nodded. "And the G-Virus... that's what's left of him. After our best and brightest vivisected him. Galvatron was born of Megatron. The G-Virus... it replicates that process, fueled by Dark Energon. Fire that gun at that crowd... we'll have twenty thousand more just like him."

The sound of the gun dropping to the ground barely registered. Snapper's jaw dropped, and he turned to Grimlock. His first thought was to ask if it was true, but looking at Grimlock's face... he knew it was.

"How... how could you?"

Grimlock spat, "It simple. We reformat twenty thousand Builders, we send strong message. Don't mess with Resistance. Builders' strength come from politics, control of infrastructure, brains. We turn brains to pudding, get twenty thousand immobile lunatics. No harm."

The Micromaster raised a finger. "Twenty thousand immobile ones, and a few hundred Maximal and Micromaster Galvatrons too. No way that can go wrong. "At that point he actually winked.

From the ground, Grimlock lunged for the gun and grabbed it, swinging it around to the crowd. Snapper was faster. "No, this madness ends now." He kicked the gun from Grimlock's hands, then converted to his tank mode and unleashed a blast a full power, vaporizing the gun and the virus alike.

From his position on the ground, the ruined form of Grimlock spat, splattering on Snapper's cheek. "You stinking traitor, Snapper. Resistance never stop till you dead."

"Some things are worth dying for, boss."

Micromasters in the crowd, noting the commotion, hurried down. Snapper raised both hands. "I guess I'm your prisoner." He looked to the red mech. "The name's Snapper. Do me a favor, don't let me be scrap to feed the games."

The red mech nodded, then winced at the pain even that simple gesture caused. "Hot Rod. I'll see you're treated fairly. Though you got me in some hot lava by wrecking that virus, my bosses wanted it recovered."

Snapper snorted. "Look, you seem like an ok Mech. For a Builder. But maybe, just maybe, it's for the best the Assembly didn't get what they wanted this time."

The Builder—Hot Rod—laughed. "From your vocodor to Primus' audio receptors."

EPILOGUE

In his bed in the infirmary of the Micropolis, Cop-Tur groaned. He had flitted in and out of consciousness for the past two solar cycles, with his doctors First Aid and Fixit seemingly baffled. They were keeping him energized and monitoring his fluid levels, hoping that might be enough for his internal repair systems to kick in.

He groaned again, cursing the mechs who broke into his facility and stole his research. First the damn Administrator of the Games checked it out, which was probably how the Resistance found out about it in the first place, then that clumsy Micro-scale gestalt broke into his Vault and stole the G-Virus.

Micro-scale gestalt... interesting notion. He started to scribble some notes... it seemed possible, perhaps if a hover-jet was used as a focal point. Page after page of schematics began to accumulate. He failed to notice his internal temperature rising or his energon consumption spiking.

Suddenly, a blinding pain took him, and a pink light began to glow from his core. It spread out in all directions, racing down his legs, up his arms, and finally reaching his head.

Galvatron glanced down at the datapad in his hand. Schematics for combining mechs? How quaint. He tossed them aside. No, he had loftier ambitions. He yanked out the tubes connecting him to a hospital bed, which prompted a series of irritating lights and sounds to start flashing and beeping. He blasted them with little thought. A white Micromaster Autobot ran into the room, and Galvatron blasted him with as little ceremony. Casually, he strode to the window and looked out. A pathetic, ramshackle city of dozens of Micromaster structures returned his gaze. Bah, such things were beneath him. He leapt down to the hard ground below, leaving small craters where his feet impacted with the ground, then converted to his truck mode and drove off into the night.