Transformers Timelines Presents

TRIGGER WARNINGS

A Tale of Suspense and Mystery from BEAST WARS: UPRISING

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10¢

Death has a smell. You probably think you know what I'm talking about—blaster burns on armor plating, spilled mech-fluid, congealing energon, rusty hydraulics and corroded intakes, and yeah, those are all smells associated with death, violent and mundane. I've smelt each and every one of them, more times than I care to count, but no, I'm talking about the last smell—the one constant—the tiny, almost imperceptible death flare of a spark trying desperately to cling to existence.

I'm cheating a little bit. For reasons I've never really discovered, I was built with a highly boosted olfactory suite. Hey, it's good to have a talent.

I stubbed out the glowing plasma of my cy-gar-ette and tossed it before immediately twisting the ignition cap on another. I'd been chain-smoking for about a megacycle while waiting for the scene-techs to arrive. My eyes and nose had already told me more or less what they would find out. The bot lying in front of me had died from a blaster shot to the cranial plating. Judging from the amount of carbon-scoring it was either a very close-range, execution-style shot, or possibly point-blank. She had been there about a solar cycle.

She had probably not suffered much—no two Cybertronian designs are exactly the same, but we have plenty of commonalities, and one of the big ones is that the main processor is located in the head. As soon as I'd got here I'd managed to extract a memory chip from an undamaged section of cranium, a little sliver of cybertonium that hadn't been completely blown out by the trauma. Hopefully the data could give me a lead on who this poor bot actually was.

The cy-gar-ettes started as a way to overload my enhanced olfactory sensors—a way to block out the more varied and unpleasant smells of the world, and bots, around me. When I realized I had learned to cope better with the sensory information and use it to my advantage, I tried to give up and had to face the truth—I was addicted. Still, there are worse habits—just ask a nuke-head.

My IFF pinged and I stirred. The MCSF cavalry was here; time to make nice.

The lead bot, tall, domed head, white and silver paint, stuck out his hand. “Lidar,” he said. “Heard you caught one.”

I nodded, looking him up and down, he smelled of cheap body wax and expensive after-market hydraulic fluid—*poser.*

“Wolfang.” I gestured to the corpse. “Real shame. Looks like a gang hit maybe. Not sure yet.”

“We'll see if we can narrow it down for you,” Lidar said, weary and cocky all at once. “You've met my partner, Sitrep?”

I had placed Sitrep, an exo-frame twin of Lidar in golds and blues, right away. He'd been particularly obstructive when I'd needed an autopsy done on an empty found dead of nuke-poisoning three deca-cycles ago. “Waste of resources,” he'd said—turned out the nucleon had been a tainted batch. I traced it back to a low-life named Sawtooth but the trail was cold by the time I made the connection. Sitrep had a depressingly bureaucratic outlook, a complete lack of personality and, judging by my nose, a mild rust rash he should probably get checked out.

“Wolfang,” Sitrep said with a nod. He did not offer anything else.

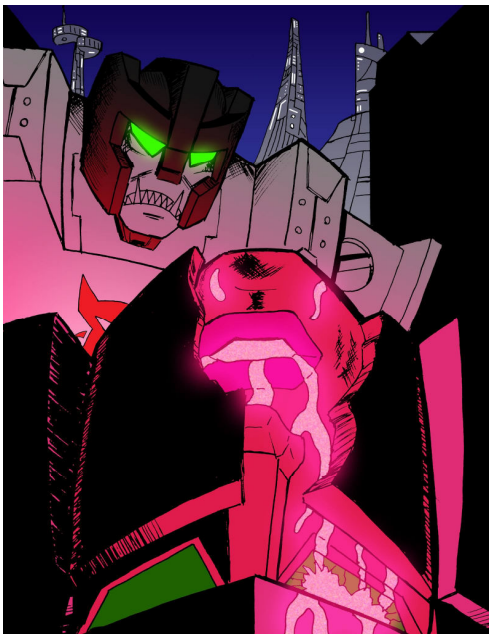
I showed Lidar the dead bot's memory chip. “There won't be much there,” he sniffed, doubtfully. “Let us complete our autopsy and we'll have you some leads.”

“I'm just hoping it'll get me started,” I told him. “Ping me when you've got something,”

Lidar inclined his head slightly in assent. “See you back at the station?” he asked. I grunted my agreement, but I wasn't going back right away.

Hurrying out of the alley, I considered my options. The autopsy might prove to be useful later but I wasn't about to hold up a fresh case while those second-rate gumshoes poked around. I had enough to go on for the moment.

My own forensic software package had been working away in the background so I pulled it to the fore. No signs of a struggle, and the damage was to her face, which suggested she might have known the assailant. Pooling fluids indicated she had been killed where we found her; no one had moved the body. Best of all, though the dead bot's faceplate had been badly melted by the shot that killed her, my systems had pulled together a ninety per-cent accurate image of what she would have looked like in life.



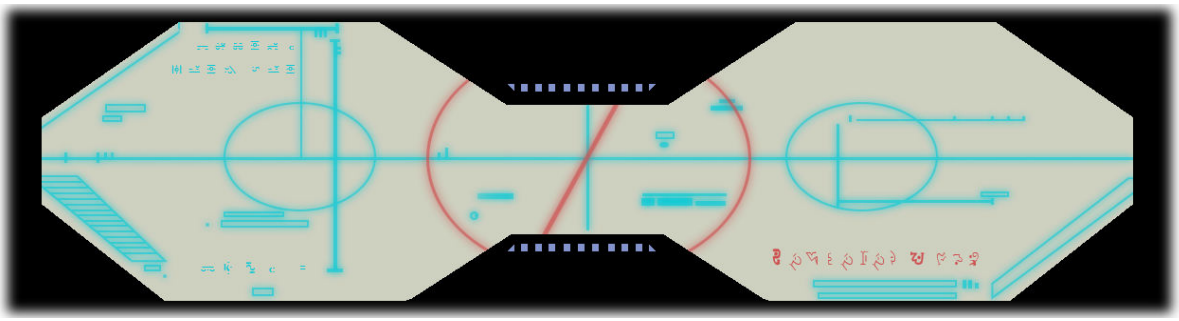
Her chassis was chunky but curved, with obvious signs of an aerial alt-mode. With no active IFF I'd have to wait for the autopsy to be absolutely sure, but the design philosophy looked like it pre-dated the great reformatting, which, based on her size and apparent mobility, made her a Micromaster. This presented a fresh problem—she was technically a Builder, which meant my random murder was about to become a political plasma grenade. Luckily Lidar and Sitrep would do everything by the

book, which meant I had at least twelve megacycles before Aura pulled me into her office for a “sensitivity briefing.” Time to get moving.
The first thing to do was to interface with the memory chip. I inserted it into the port on my arm and adjusted my permissions for Micromaster software.

The memories came in a rush, images, sounds, and colors—a heady mixture of elation and fear and deeper, controlled but all-consuming feelings of loss. I got images of fire, bots marching, but nothing concrete—conflicting sensations from completely different days of her life.

I saw her body, as she saw it, her arm was green, not pink—I saw her laughing and joking with Maximals, Predacons, other Micromasters. There was a sense of happiness despite tragedy, and—Primus, it had been so long since he'd experienced it—innocence. The sheer joy of dancing to a beat, arms over her head. The heady sensation of a kiss so engaging it made her spark skip a pulse. A few images were blurred at the edges due to excessive engex consumption, or, more likely, electrum. The files were badly corrupted and almost nauseating to try to make sense of. This was emotional memory, not literal, so there were no recognizable faces I could run and nothing that would point to a gang connection. I pondered the electrum angle briefly, but since the war started up us cops have all been refocused on the “bigger picture” as the higher-ups call it. A bot with Builder connections wouldn't need to go through a shady gang to score a few dabs of 'leccy.

The only thing to go on was the green bodywork. There was only one affordable mod-shop within thirty blocks, so that was my first stop.



Hotwire's was a prefab stuck between two older tower-blocks. It was only one proto-sized story, but it extended back the width of the block, making it narrow but deep. Chairs for the patrons lined both walls, interspersed with workshop-style slabs for more serious modifications. There wasn't a lot of activity at this time of day, just one reedy-looking Maximal leaking lubricant from his optics as a mod-tech chiseled the name of his latest Conjunx off his skidplate in a shower of painful looking sparks. I gave him a cheerful thumbs up as I passed them by.

Hotwire's office was at the rear. Most of the time she kept her door open, so she could survey her domain and make sure she knew who was coming to visit. She had a reputation for providing the chassis art and more exotic modifications for Mayhemists, Petro's Firestormers, Gnashteeth's (AKA Megatron's) Darksyders, and other local groups of thugs and miscreants—given the number of unconfirmed mentions of her shop in MCSF reports I doubted she was pleased to see me, but as always, she put on a good show.

"Wolfang, darling!" she called expansively, getting out of her chair as I approached. "What can we do for you today? Been hankering for a little change of lifestyle, have we?"

"Sorry Hotwire, not today," I replied. "I'm here on business."

"Oh that's a pity." The Cyberdroid gave a broad smile. I wish I could say it didn't reach her optics, but it did—Hotwire was that good. "I was sure that *this* time you'd let me do something about that jawline." She reached up and ran a single elegant finger along the aforementioned bit of my facial structure.

I took a step back, forced a smirk to my face, and called up the reconstructed picture of the dead Micromaster from the alley. "It's about this bot, do you know her?"

Hotwire stared at the picture—I could see her optics whirring back and forth as she made a show of studying it intently. "I'm very sorry sweetie, but I don't believe I've had the pleasure. What is she supposed to have done?"

"Died, mostly," I said, trying not to let the anger creep into my voice. "Her finish was a cheap respray-job, so you can imagine who I thought of first." I gestured to our surroundings.

Hotwire made a noise of mock horror. "Darling, I'm sure I don't know what you're suggesting!" I noted the way in which our friendly walk and talk was taking me closer and closer to the front door.

"I'm not accusing you of anything," I said, easily. "I just thought you might know something."

"Not a thing I'm afraid."

"That's too bad," I admonished, "Because right now, we don't know exactly how she died, but should it turn out to be anything to do with a shoddy refit or tainted finish, I'll be back here with a warrant." The lie came easy. Hotwire wouldn't hold it against me when she found out—I wasn't naïve enough to think 'if'.

Hotwire's smile faded imperceptibly for just the briefest of nanokliks—without training and long, wearying experience I would

never have spotted it. “Let me see the picture again.”

I called it up and she made an even bigger pantomime of carefully examining every microhic. “Now that you mention it,” she mused, “she might have been in here. I think it was Lube who saw her—he's just over here.”

She led me to the Cyberdroid working on the luckless Maximal's Endura-brand and explained the situation. He scratched his cranial plating—“Yeah, sure, I saw her… hmm… when was it?”

The facedown Maximal groaned. “Can we hurry it up? I've got a date with my ex later—if she sees her batch-twin's name she'll kill me!”

“You're nearly done…” Lube said absently and rubbed his chin, evidently lost in thought.

I tried to speed up the process, “I don't suppose you have any records, receipts or..?”

Lube looked like he'd been caught raiding the energon-goodies; Hotwire's smile remained unmoved. “No, not for her, she paid cash. I'm positive it was just a top-up though. Her finish was pretty cheap and was starting to fade. I gave her a quick respray and that was that.”

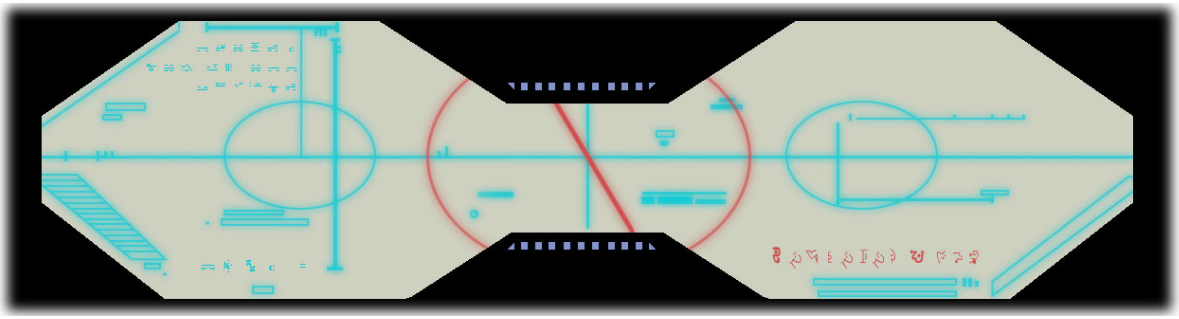
“You got a name?”

Lube shook his head and shrugged helplessly. “Sorry.”

I nodded, “She say anything to you? Where she was from? Where she was staying?”

“Not really—she mentioned where she was going though; a bar. The Way Of All Things I think. She said she was meeting a friend.”

I was about to follow up but Hotwire's friendly but somehow final “Thank you, officer!” made it clear that this was all I was getting. It was enough to go on though, so I left without making trouble.



I'd noticed a couple of messages in the corner of my HUD while I was talking to the mod-techs, so when I got back into the drizzly street I stopped to open them. Both were from Aura demanding updates on the case. I still hadn't heard back from Lidar or Sitrep, so decided I could probably park that until I had time to deal with it. It would make her mad, but I could cope.

The Way Of All Things was a dive bar on the upper east side, only a few streets away from the docks. It sold watered-down Engex and played the same Hyper-Music disk over and over. I didn't get out much but when I did, I kind of liked it there. Bots kept themselves to themselves.

The proprietor was a square-ish Cyberdroid called Monxo. He wasn't exactly friendly with me, but he wasn't exactly friendly with any of his regulars. If he greeted you warmly, that was because he didn't know or trust you enough to be his normal grumpy self.

The bar was mostly deserted, but then it usually was. The war had bots rattled and while some might use the uncertainty as an excuse to imbibe, many others would be hoarding their keys, or trying to find somewhere safer to go. It was the way of the world and had been for a long time—Monxo would survive. I clocked two bots, a Predacon, most likely a dock worker with no shift to go to, and a Maximal—she watched me enter with interest, but went back to her engex quickly enough.

I ordered an engex with a chaser of Old-Corroder. Monxo checked his chronometer. “Aren't you on duty?”

“I'm headed home after this. You going to report me?”

He shrugged, “Guess not.”

The drinks were scrap, like always, but they hit the spot well enough. “Now that you mention it, I am here on business.”

“Thought as much. Shoot.”

I showed Monxo the picture. His optics zoomed and retracted, but I couldn't read much else from his body-language. “Seen her before?”

“Sorry, boss, you know I ain’t got much of a memory.”

This was Evasion 101, and after Hotwire I wasn't in the mood to hear it. I lightened my tone. “Say, weren’t you a Headmaster back in the day?”

My tactic worked—I’d thrown him off balance. “Well, I sure wasn’t a Targetmaster,” he said with a nervous chuckle.

“Guess not,” I agreed, “what with them being wiped out to a bot. But here’s the thing. I’ve never heard of a bot loaded with backup

Builder RAM having a faulty memory. Especially since…" I gestured, taking in the mostly empty bar, and cycled the aggression back into my tone. "Besides, I reckon she'd stand out some, on account of being *a head taller* than most of your regulars and bright fragging pink!"

Monxo actually looked spooked, which may have been a first for him. "Yeah, OK, you got me. I seen her in here once or twice. Why do you even care? Not like you to get invested in a case." He glanced nervously at his clientele, but neither of them seemed interested in our conversation.

I ignored his question—mostly because I didn't have a good answer. "Why the lie, Monxo? I thought we were such good buddies."

He winced. "Yeah, keep it down, Wolfy—I got a neutrality to maintain. Truth is, you drinkin' in here makes some of the bots nervous, you know?"

"I'm not an idiot, Monxo. Why do you think I ordered a Turbo-Engex when I dropped by? Come on. You know her name and you're gonna tell me."

He shrugged. "Sure, I guess—it was… Twirl, I think. Didn't know nothin' about her though. She wasn't from 'round here."

I gave him a friendly wink and let my gaze linger just slightly too long. "You know it makes sense Monxo, and do me a favor, don't try to stall me again, or I'll come back here with an energon purity sensor. You got it?"

I turned to leave. The bar was empty. I looked at Monxo but he wasn't giving anything away. I shrugged and lit up a cy-gar-ette.

Monxo yelped, as I knew he would, "By the Oracle, watch out!" he yelled. "The energon!"

"Your engex wouldn't burn if I detonated it with a thermal charge. Stay lucky, Monx!"

I was pretty sure the dockworker would be waiting for me outside. The moment spent lighting up gave me time to analyze my sensor logs of the alley. There was realistically only one possible place an attack could come from, a stack of rusting old kegs near the door. Without stopping to check I booted the barrels as hard as I could. Nothing.

He jumped me from behind—must have been hiding on the roof of the bar, which showed a level of athleticism and commitment I hadn't anticipated from an opportunistic street-thug. He was a big son of a glitch, gold and purple, with wide sensors on either side of his faceplate. He was swinging a piece of reinforced tubing like a bat. He caught me a glancing blow across the cranium that made my

visual-feed glitch. I fought back, half turning and aiming a clumsy strike with my left hand. He parried it easily, but it opened him up to my right. I wasn't balanced for a proper punch, but I've been doing this a long time—I fight dirty. I thrust the still burning cy-gar-ette right at his optic. The white hot plasma burned out his lens and he fell back, steam pouring from the wound. It wasn't over; the optical damage was only superficial and had only made him more determined.

I blocked the first two blows with a clang of metal. No time to go for my gun so I relied on my fists and forearms. "What… what do you even want?" I managed to gasp out as I took another staggering blow to the shoulders.

"Stay out of this," he growled, "get the message?" He punctuated this with a right hook to my jaw. I screamed as I was knocked from my feet.

"Who's… asking?" I managed to get out between ragged gasps from my overtaxed intakes.

"No-one's askin', Wolfy." An expertly applied kick to the back of the knee caused a new damage alarm and kept me down. "They're tellin'. Forget about the girl." He clocked me once more around the back of the head and I hit the deck. I don't think I was out for long but when my vision de-fragged my assailant was gone.

I'm a good cop, so my subconscious had already been running identification subroutines even as my primary sensors rebooted. Frustratingly, they came up clean. I'd had him pegged for a low-level thug for hire, trying to supplement his income. This wasn't his first cyber-rodeo though; he knew how to administer a beating. It seemed impossible the MCSF would have nothing. He had been shuttled in from elsewhere then, but why?

I shook my head, spat out a loose sprocket and realized I was limping. I asked for a full damage report. The red feedback all over my HUD was at a level I'd christened 'seriously in need of a drink' but Monxo's was 'mysteriously' closed. The damage was extensive but would heal—my pride, however, was seriously injured. I've been in my fair share of fights and, like all MCSF officers, was programmed for hand to hand combat. My assailant was good, trained—maybe to Special Forces level.

A blue message glyph pierced the red swarm—it was Aura again. I didn't have sufficient command over my sensory functions to stop it auto-playing: "Wolfang! I don't know what you're playing at but this is no time to play lone… wolf…" I smiled at her embarrassed pause as she continued. "I need you back at the station ASAP for a debrief." I messaged her a full damage report and told her I'd see her tomorrow. Then I turned off my transmitter and transformed to interceptor-mode.

My apartment wasn't far—hard to live in the good part of town on a cop's salary. Well, an *honest* cop's salary. In actual fact plenty of my colleagues maintained quite state of the art lodgings by regularly shaking down local businesses and skimming the top of drugs and arms busts—thank the Resistance for the uptick in weapons traffic—life during wartime. The irony was not lost on me that I, being who I am, was probably less corrupt than half the other MCSF officers.

My internal nanobots were working busily as I cruised at a comfortable speed along the damp, poorly lit strip of metal known as the Main Drag and I was starting to feel a little better. I turned into my street, pulled up in front of my building and transformed.

The main staircase was lit up, which was odd at this hour but not unheard of—usually it was an Empty trying to get out of the weather. "Hey!" I called out. No response.

Shrugging, I mounted the stairs and walked to my front door, which was ajar. This was much more perplexing. I found enough backup power to put me into combat mode and drew my blaster. Slowly I edged the door open and pointed the gun left and right across my small living space. Not taking my optics from the room I fumbled for the light. It came on with the sickly yellow half-glow of old neon. The lowest of low tech.

I caught movement to my right and swiveled, yelling a warning. A bot stepped out of the shadows and smiled. With shock I realized I recognized her—the Maximal from The Way Of All Things. She was slim and shorter than me, with curved black limbs and a mobile golden faceplate which was wearing an expression of amusement.

"What?" I managed before she began to speak.

"Honestly, Wolfang, put that thing away. The state you're in I'd have it halfway across the room before you even pulled the trigger, and in any case, wouldn't you rather just have a drink?" She smiled again and I realized she was holding engex glasses—my engex glasses—with little balls of nitro-ice at the bottom keeping everything cold. She was right—I really would rather have a drink.

I holstered my weapon and took the glass, "You'd better have a good explanation for this," I said as she led me to my own couch.

"Of course," she said, and I believed her, even if she wasn't about to share it.

"This is about the dead girl?" I asked, knowing that it was.

"Yes. Twirl."

I nodded, "Did you know her?"

“We were friends.” The Maximal looked away with a look of desolation. If this was acting, she was very good at it.

“Oh yeah?” I asked, doubtfully, “I didn't see you in her memory-engrams at all.”

The Maximal shook her head, “We were recent friends. You interfaced with her?”

“A little of her survived—I got a sense of who she was—no idea of why anyone would hurt her.” I gave that up easily. There was no real information there and I wanted to see how this mystery bot would react. “She seemed fun. Not someone who deserved to die.—Innocent.”

The Maximal half-smiled. “Maybe, yes, as innocent as anyone who's been alive since the Great War can be, I suppose. Innocent by choice, you might say.”

“Neutral?” I asked, mildly.

“To a fault. Twirl had no interest in factions, politics, or any of it. She was almost unique there.”

Mentally I tied this into the sense I had already gotten of Twirl's loss and anger. Perhaps there was more going on here than a mugging gone wrong.

Sensing the Maximal was about to clam up I changed the topic. “How about your name?” I asked, as friendly as I could be to a stranger who had broken the industrial-grade code-lock on my apartment door and helped themselves to my engex.

“Venus.” A lie, but somehow I didn’t mind. “I'm here to tell you something, and to ask a favor.”

I cocked my head on one side, “Oh?”

“Twirl died in a stupid, violent way that she didn't deserve.” An emotive pause. “But you need to stop the investigation—for all our sakes.” ‘Venus's’ performance was very good, if slightly mannered—my interrogation programming couldn't get much of a handle on her. I believed that she had known Twirl—that was more or less certain, and I was pretty sure she was being genuine about being sorry she had died, but there was a lot beneath the surface.

“Seems like a coincidence,” I said, as nonchalantly as possible.

She looked away, “I don't know what you mean.”

I indicated some of my dents and scratches. “The fraghead that did this to me earlier wanted me to drop the case as well.”

She stared right at me then, defiance pouring from her unusually black optics, “You can do what you like—I'm just telling you that dropping it will be the best outcome for everyone.”

I swigged the engex, savored the mild chemical burn in my fuel processor. “Everyone huh? Twirl's dead, and whoever killed her is still out there.”

Venus's faceplate creased into a mask of vulnerability, she edged herself closer and put her slender hand on my knee. She smelled like fresh body wax with the lingering scent of cy-gar-ette smoke. “Wolfang, I'm desperate, I've got no-one else, so I'm going to share something with you.”

I nodded, trying to look as understanding as possible while silently dismissing the warning feedback from my proximity sensors. I'm a pretty paranoid bot, you kind of have to be in my line of work, but there's not really a bigger buzz-kill than a silent alarm screaming at you about all the ways a potential romantic encounter could end up with you dead. I thumbed the button on the dispenser in my forearm. “Cy-gar-ette? You look like you could use one.”

Venus nodded quickly and took the little stick of metal. She worked the self-ignition mechanism like a seasoned pro and took a couple of heartfelt drags. With a slightly steadier voice she continued.

“I met Twirl a couple of deca-cycles ago. We had both just moved to Iacon and didn't really know anyone. Twirl was a refugee, basically—after the Resistance moved into Vos she was planning to go back to Crystal City, where her people were, but some Resistance fraghead had blown that sky-high as well, so she drifted across the border to Iacon.”

Privately I pulled up a brief nano-second summary of the fighting in Vos. It was still Builder-controlled, ostensibly—they certainly weren't letting Resistance forces anywhere near the Iacon border—but there were whole districts that saw running battles or roadside bombs every night, and the Builders responded with everything they had. It was a scrap place to live, whichever side you were on. Political neutrality, as so many of the fashionable liked to claim in the relative safety of Iacon, would be impossible.

“Did she talk much about Vos?” I asked.

“You're wondering if she was targeted because she was from there?” Venus shook her head, “I don't think so. Twirl wasn't the type to get involved in politics, or warfare.”

“No, but she was a Builder though. There're plenty out there now

who resent the Builders for this situation.” I knew this first hand, having been involved in more than enough crowd control situations and hate crime investigations since the Uprising, as they were calling it, began. Resistance sympathy was light in Iacon, but it was certainly present, and couldn't be ruled out. Still, it would take a very brave or very stupid bot to kill a Builder out of mere frustration.

“How about you?” I asked, as innocently as possible, “What brought you to Iacon?”

“We're not talking about me,” she stated, matter-of-factly. I didn't push it.

Venus drained her glass and poured us both another. Chemical tolerance alarms began to flare up but I threatened them with deletion and they calmed down. My neural net and I have an *understanding* about substances.

“What did you want to share?” I asked as gently as possible.

“I just think… I just know… Twirl was vibrant and happy-go-lucky but she was also scared as hell. I think *the Resistance* was after her.” She whispered the last sentence, as though there were Resistance surveillance drones hidden in the furniture—heck, maybe there were. She peered into my optics deeply, searching for some reaction. I thought I detected a flicker of disappointment, but before I could say anything I felt the hand on my thigh move and she kissed me—I let her.

I know what you're thinking, and no, I promise I'm not an idiot—I was ninety-nine per-cent certain that Venus's name was not Venus, and that she was either trying to put me off the scent in terms of the investigation or pump me for more information. However, I was an off-duty cop, badly in need of a recharge, putting myself back together after a pretty savage beating to both my body and my ego, craving a drink and a cy-gar-ette, confronted with a beautiful stranger offering not only those things but also possibly information on my case. What would you have done?

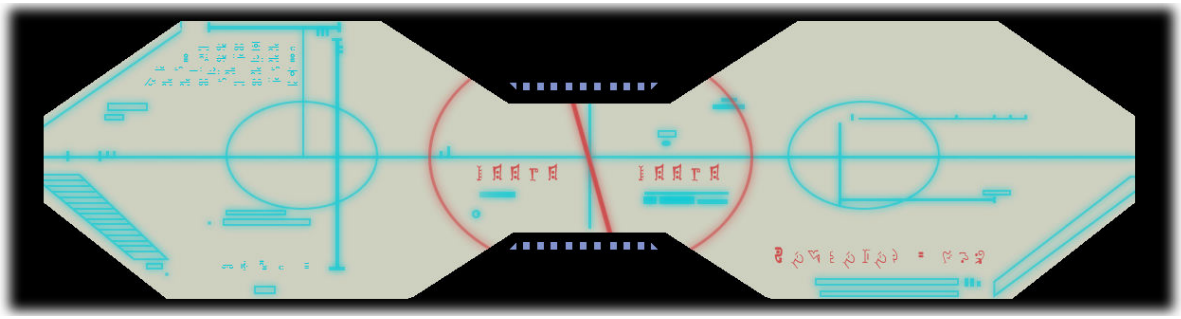
I knew it was a mistake the nanoklik before the virus hit. The shrieking firewalls and the anguish of the contact virus rampaging through my systems just confirmed it. Motor functions went first and I slumped. Venus shoved me off the couch and onto the floor, although she did take time to arrange me in a slightly more comfortable position. Sensors started to blink on and off. Sound was distorted and my vision fritzed at the edges. “Sorry,” I think I heard her say. “Sorry it had to be this way.”

She was still raking through my memory-banks when it happened. I cried out when I felt the change coming on. “No... no...” Venus took a shocked step back as the trigger-phrase forced itself from my vocal processor, “TERRORIZE!” The virus had penetrated the

various safeguards and disinformation screens I had had in place for stellar cycles. My transformation cog flipped around and engaged seldom used mechanisms as my armor's main color shimmered from grey to red—my fangs lengthened, my claws extended and, my back arching, I gave a despairing howl as my true, Predacon form asserted itself.

Venus staggered backwards, "Primus..." I heard her gasp, but it was more in wonder than horror, "What did they do to you? I knew you'd be a useful to us, but you're a secret Pred? This is the motherlode..."

Even as I fought for control the virus was climbing around inside my brain module like a spiderbot building a web. My defenses were swatted aside time and again as more and more information was dragged out of my memory banks. I tried to cry out, but that functionality was buried under a mound of redundant subroutines that it was taking all my processing power to run. My internal chronometer appeared to freeze, and the nanoklik it took to change felt like an eternity. I blacked out.



When I came to I was still on the floor. The weak glow of the sun, coupled with a slight uptick in bustle outside, told me it was daytime. My apartment's chronometer was transmitting a wake-up call. Unfortunately it had been doing that for over a megacycle. I groaned and sat up to take stock.

The virus seemed to have self-deleted, or at least shut down. I'd need a thorough diagnostic to be sure, but everything seemed to be in working order. My cranium throbbed, but that could easily have been from the booze or the beating. Venus, predictably, was gone.

The other icons floating irritatingly before my optics were yet more messages. Some future, slightly less groggy, version of me would deal with them.

A cy-gar-ette was first, and essential—I eyed the half-drunk glasses of engex on the table but I thought it might make me void my oil. I ingested a full ration of standard energon through the ports in my fingertips instead. I felt recharged but it did nothing for the hangover.

What had I learned? Twirl may or may not have had a friend who may or may not be called Venus, and the Resistance may have been after her. Then again, according to the official policy of both the MCSF and the PSP, the Resistance was after all of us. Given that, as far as I knew, Venus had absorbed the sum total of my knowledge of both MCSF and PSP operations and nearly put me into stasis lock, this was pretty thin Visco—and as a semi-regular at Monxo's, I've had some *thin* Visco. I had to find Venus then, and not just because she was my best lead—I needed to know if she'd blow my cover. Time for some self-reflection.

On-board diagnostic software revealed that the virus was very good but not perfect. It had been installed in a hurry and not specifically tailored my own cyberbiology. The fact that my firmware was Predacon, rather than the expected Maximal, had eventually caught it in its tracks. While most of it was gone, a trace remained. I would need a good computer lab and some expertise to do anything with said trace, however.

Full disclosure, as anyone could tell from that embarrassing display. I'm not exactly MCSF through and through, certainly not full-time. My spark is actually Predacon, and technically my actual employer was the Predacon Secret Police. This was a state of affairs I had been used to for stellar cycles, and truth be told, I did not feel as though I had a great deal of loyalty for either side over the other. That said, my secret was now in the hands of someone obviously very unpredictable and it was unlikely that the MCSF would be very forgiving if it got out. With this grim thought uppermost in my mind, I checked my messages.

"Wolfang, it's Aura. You're way overdue reporting in about this case and after the damage report you sent me, Primus help me I'm actually worried about you. Please report in." Next.

"It's Lidar. The autopsy report is in—you want me to upload it, or do you want to talk it through in person?" Promising.

"Wolfang, you're overdue your latest psych-eval. Please get in touch—a bot in your *position* needs all the support he can get." Vampire, PSP shrink. Delete.

"Wolfang, Onyx. The case-files you sent me piqued my interest. Report in ASAP." My handler, interesting.

And, lastly: "It's Venus. You're going to be very valuable to me. Hope there's no hard feelings about that." There was a little repeating image file of her blowing me a kiss—couldn't help but smile grimly at that one.

Choices, choices. I considered my options. Reporting to Onyx Primal was attractive—the Mandala definitely had the analysis software I needed to work on my virus sample. The MCSF station did as well, but I didn't want to have to admit how I contracted it,

whereas the PSP was a much more "need to know" kind of organization. On the other hand, I had probably pushed things with Aura as far as I could get away with—and I did actually have a cover to maintain there. Somewhat reluctantly I decided to go to the station. I steeled myself for the inevitable pain and reactivated my Maximal disguise for the short trip from my couch to the street, then converted back to vehicle.

I had the route on autopilot so I was able to spend the time messaging both headquarters to let them know my plans—with the important bits edited out, of course. Aura's response was a curt "My office, as soon as you arrive," whereas Onyx did not reply at all.

When the door to her office hissed and slid back, Aura was standing with her hands clamped behind her back, looking out of the window. I caught the telltale whiff of cy-gar-ette smoke in the recycled air. Aura was not a regular smoker—guess the case had her on edge. She wheeled round on me.

"Wolfang, where in the PIT have you been?" The red and yellow Maximal looked absolutely furious.

"Looking into leads about the dead *Builder*." I said, quite deliberately. It calmed her down some.

"Look, Wolfang… you're a good investigator, but this is a huge case. You can't just go off-codex without authorization. We should have a task force, press conferences."

I nodded, "Yep, except with our glorious leaders telling us there're Resistance suicide bombers under all our recharge slabs, Iacon doesn't have the keys for any of that—so it's just me, right?"

Aura slumped into her chair. "Right."

I gave her the most neutral expression I could manage, "Look. You said it yourself, I'm a good investigator. I've got some leads. I'm going to bring this in."

She gave a sort of mirthless half-laugh. "Do you have to?"

I was genuinely puzzled, "What do you mean?"

"Do the math, Wolfang; she was a Builder. When was the last time you heard about a Builder being killed in Iacon?"

I searched my databanks. "Been a couple of stellar cycles at least."

She nodded, "Right. Because Maximals and Predacons don't *kill* Builders in random gang hits or muggings, because Builders,

fundamentally, look after their own. This is all leading me to one of two conclusions."

I was following—it was a line of thought I'd been considering for some time and it was the biggest reason I had been reluctant to return to Aura in the first place. "Either the Resistance is operating in Iacon…"

"Or?" she prompted.

"Or the Builders did this themselves, which they really wouldn't want us investigating." I indicated the terminal which connected Aura's office to the Builder at the heart of the station. "Have you heard anything from Strongarm?"

Aura gravely shook her head, "No, and that's what's worrying me. We're flying blind here, trying to guess their intentions. Be careful out there Wolfang. This case has far too many unknowns, and far too many ways it could go south."

I manufactured a confident grin for her benefit. "Don't worry about me. I'll be the spark of discretion."

"I mean it, Wolfang. Don't rattle any cages." She narrowed her optics. "The Builders would be the first to say we've got a planet full of bodies dropping left and right. What's one more in this mess?"

I growled. It was involuntary and made Aura step back. That was more Pred than I usually display, some lingering effect of my run-in with Venus. "The war's not even here yet and we're already letting bots kill each other in the streets? I don't give a frag what the Builders would say—this bot died for a reason, it happened on our watch and some pistonhead beat my skidplate half to scrap metal trying to warn me off—I'm going to find out why." What I didn't say was how much the engram had gotten to me. The image of her, spinning about, alive and full of joy, flashed through my processor. I shut it out.

Aura looked at me hard for a long moment, then nodded her agreement. I left before I could worry her any further.

I had barely stepped outside her office when I felt, rather than heard, the explosion. Red emergency lights started to wheel and a siren began a mournful howl. I had been wirelessly jacked into the station mainframe since I arrived, so I was quickly able to determine the site of the blast. While other MCSF officers pounded to the emergency exits, I slipped away and ran at top speed towards the morgue.

The cavernous metal room was filled with smoke and fire. From the blast radius and heat of the flames, the bomb looked like it had been a fairly crude design, similar to the ones that the

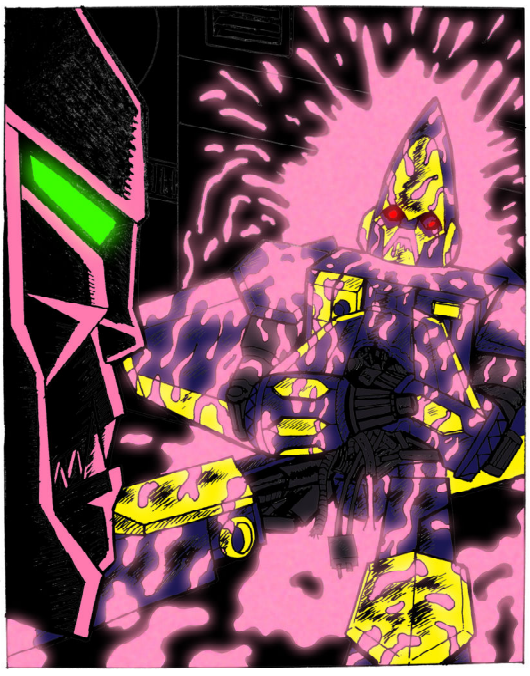
Resistance were using so effectively against our supply convoys in Vos. It would have been a simple canister of energon with a makeshift fuse.

Twirl's body was still laid out in three segments on separate diagnostic slabs—legs, torso and arms, cranial unit—but it looked ruined beyond recognition. I fought my way through the smoke, feeling the scratchy tightness as my filtration system tried hard to scrub the chemicals—a few less cy-gar-ettes and it might have been more efficient, but I didn't have time to worry about that now.

As an MCSF officer I carry an on board fire suppression system—a miniature cryogenic sprayer—and, willing my hand to retract, I used it. The freezing foam snuffed out the worst of the fire around Twirl's body, but a quick scan revealed that she had been burned and melted beyond recognition. The techs might discover something from the remains, but it would take a lot longer.

The station's automated cryo-sprinklers finally kicked in and extinguished the more persistent of the energon fires. With the dancing flames quelled, I realized I wasn't alone in the gutted room. Sitrep, the officious, bullet-headed morgue-tech, was lying in a twitching heap in the corner.

Scanning a faint energy reading I ran over to him and surveyed the damage. It was bad—most of his torso had been torn open. I could tell just from the sweet benzene smell that the burnt residue in the wound had been his innermost energon—nothing would save him now. Zooming his one remaining optic lens he extended a charred and blackened hand and pawed feebly at my forearm. “Wolfang…” he rasped through a corroded vocoder, “Exter…” he waved wanly at the melted ruin of Twirl's body, “Ex…” He coughed, a buzzing, sparking, rattle—his vocoder had given up. The light in his optic retreated to a point and his head slumped. I didn't need my MCSF training to tell that he was beyond repair.



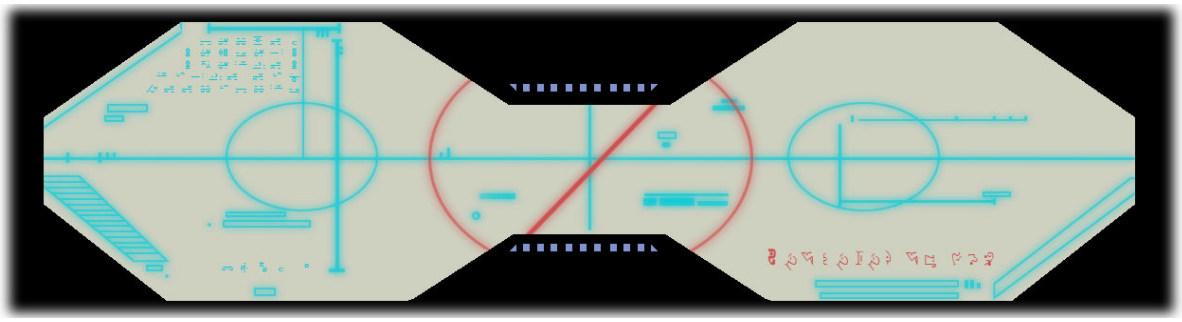
I touched my comm relay. “Wolfang to Lidar,” I said, “Wolfang to Lidar, please respond.” Nothing but static. The room was a blackened ruin but there was no way that Sitrep's partner had been caught in the blast too. I tried to trace the signal and was surprised to realize that it had not even been picked up. Lidar was missing, which made him a suspect.

I was trying to work out what this meant I should do when my comms buzzed angrily, “Wolfang! Wolfang, it's Aura! What happened?”

I filled her in, giving her pictures of the burnt out morgue as well as video of me fighting the fire. “Wolfang, we have to do something. The blast took out one of Strongarm's major neural clusters. One moment we were conversing, the next she was screaming in my head before the shock shut her down. The Builders will be sending some Micromaster techs to repair her tomorrow. I need some answers by then or they'll liquidate the department.”

I nodded, although there was no-one left alive to see me. “Look at it another way. This shows it probably wasn't anything to do with them. I've got a few leads to follow up, but I warn you… things could get a little ‘off-codex.’”

Somehow I could hear Aura narrowing her eyes even without a visual-feed. “You let me work that out. Just get these Resistance sons of glitches.”



Less than a megacycle later I was parked in an alcove beside the Mandala—the primary headquarters of the Predacon Secret Police in Iacon—and reflecting on the bravado of my parting words to Aura. I did have a lead, possibly—the little scrap of code that Venus had left behind, but that was more or less it. Further scans of the morgue had yielded nothing of worth—the data in the computers had been corrupted beyond repair and Sitrep was in no condition to tell me anything. I swallowed—time to face the music.

I took one last sensor sweep of my environment—no one observing, and no cameras—and spoke the activation phrase that would subvert my usual vehicular transformation sequence and let me convert to my Predacon configuration. As always, there was pain, but not as much as the sequence triggered by the virus. Whereas my Maximal body was primarily blue and grey, my natural form was marked by red highlights. My chest was the hood of my interceptor mode, rather than the roof and windshield combination that always made me feel more vulnerable than I was comfortable with. My face reconfigured as well, taking on a more lupine appearance and swapping my green optics for a menacing red. Oh, and my fangs sharpened. It was altogether an intimidating exoframe, one I was rather proud of. Vampire once remarked that my entire posture was

different, which wasn't something I consciously shot for but, hey, I'll take it. Throw in some spark baffles and no one would ever look at Wolfang the Predacon and see Wolfang the Maximal. Of course, it helped that the PSP had scrubbed all record of Wolfang the Predacon from every database on the planet.

I approached the front desk of the cavernous entrance hall. The intelligence building was ancient. Rumor had it that Soundwave, Megatron's greatest spymaster, had once sat at its center for a few centuries when the city changed hands for the thousandth time. During that time, the Decepticon Justice Division had run a frighteningly efficient execution team from these very walls. Statues of Kaon and Tesarus flanked the lobby—there had been some debate about removing them as a gesture of good faith at the end of the war, but as the sides blurred into meaninglessness and Autobot and Decepticon alike become moribund and inward-looking, such symbolic actions seemed less important than the survival of the species, and so the sculptures remained.

The only empty plinth had been like that for millennia—a statue that had been removed when the truth about its subject had come to light. Counterpunch—Megatron's elite spy—had been an Autobot all along. The plinth remained however, bearing the legend, "Helex: Never forget." The Autobot Punch, as Counterpunch, had infiltrated the then Decepticon capital and, rallying support from the oppressed locals, assassinated the triumvirate of warlords who had been governing in Megatron's absence. I had always liked the story of Counterpunch—found it insightful. My own three configurations and spark-cloaking technology owed more to his cyberbiology than to conventional triple changer anatomy.

I approached the receptionist. "Wolfang for Onyx Primal," I stated, and I was instructed to take the lift. During the forty Builder-sized floor journey I reflected on exactly what I'd say to my handler.

When I got there, Onyx was as cheery as ever, which is to say, not at all. The darkness around him seemed to be down to more than just his black finish—it was in his mood and manner of speaking. "Greetings, Wolfang," he said, grimly. "Thank you for coming in person. It has been too long old…" he paused for an off-putting amount of time as he sought the most accurate word to describe our relationship, "friend," he finished, but it clearly left a sour taste. "What can you tell me about our dead Builder?" He lingered on the last word with evident distaste.

I relayed most of what I had, relishing the chance to speak in my natural Polyhexian accent. He nodded as I dutifully repeated the data he had already downloaded. I tactfully decided to leave out my encounter with Venus as I still didn't have a handle on her yet and it did not paint me in the best light.

"Before the attack, did the MCSF notice anything… *unusual* about

the body?" he asked.

"Beats me," I said, "It was destroyed, and it looks deliberate. Just to check… that wasn't us, was it?"

"No," he shook his head, "we were caught as off guard as the Maximals."

"Resistance then?" I asked.

"Possibly. You need to find out—and fast." *Great*, I said in the privacy of my own cranial unit, *this doesn't complicate things at all.*

"Do you have anything for me?" I asked, without much hope.

He nodded. "It's not much but it might get you started. After you reported in we sent an interrogation team and shook down Monxo a little. We got some surveillance footage of your dead Builder when she was very much alive. It's only a scrap—Monxo's a cheapskate when it comes to security—but maybe you'll spot something we haven't."

Eagerly I downloaded the holographic vid and zoned out briefly while I took a look. There was no audio, or color, but Twirl's distinct body-shape was easy enough to spot—she was dancing energetically by the bar while Maximals and Predacons whooped and drummed the tables. Wait… was that?

I paused the vid and rewound—yes, in the corner—even in the static, glitchiness of Monxo's long outdated security—was Venus. She was sitting on her own, staring intently at Twirl, like she was studying her—only smiling or reacting in any way when Twirl looked in her direction. "Got any more?" I asked.

"No," Onyx said gravely, "I admit it's not much."

I ran it again, this time I ignored Twirl and Venus and studied the other bots—one stood out immediately. I ran his distinct sensor framed visage through my memory-banks and got a match—the purple and gold thug who had jumped me earlier. I paused the vid and pointed him out to Onyx. "Know who this is?"

Onyx got a far-away look in his eye as he scanned through files I could only dream of having access to. "Eighty-eight percent probability that he's a high level Resistance enforcer called Fennec. Nasty piece of work by all accounts."

"He's the sucker who cold-cocked me back at The Way Of All Things. Sorry I didn't get decent video of him before. If he's high-up Resistance it might explain his training."

Onyx started to pace, black wings flaring dramatically behind him. “Then they *are* involved. This is even worse than we feared. Your mission has become even more important. Find the killer—find the Resistance cell—and bring them to *justice*. The security of Iacon depends upon you.”

Onyx had apparently never heard of the phrase ‘too much pressure.’ As I left I wondered if he and Aura had ever met—intense ideological and slight physiological differences aside, they would probably get along like scraplets in a munitions factory.

I checked in at the computer lab before leaving. It was not hard to grab a spare terminal and feed in the virus scrap for analysis. While it was running I checked my messages again. There was nothing from Venus, which was a little surprising, as I was half-expecting a blackmail attempt now that she knew my secret. Aura too had been quiet—evidently too busy with damage control down at the station to ride my skidplate about where I was and what I was up to. There was a second plea from Vampire about my psychological evaluation, which I binned without listening to, and a slightly more interesting message from Tarantulas, the Mandala's chief science officer.

“I would like to debrief you before you leave the Mandala, please come to my office,” he rasped in his distinct whine. The analysis was only five percent complete, so I figured I had the time.

Tarantulas' office was really more of a laboratory, or series of laboratories. I had been told, although not by him, that my stealth armor had been perfected in those rooms, along with the various weapons and listening devices the PSP use while conducting their operations. Rumors abounded both within the PSP and without about the ethics of some of the science officer's experiments. I had no first-hand evidence, but always found myself involuntarily clicking my sensors into combat mode around him. He was a hard bot to like, but his results spoke for themselves.

I found him poring over a holographic schematic that he'd evidently assembled from my scan of Twirl's body. He seemed deep in thought, shifting from foot to foot and rambling almost sub-vocally to himself in a continuous rasp. When I had deemed the silence sufficiently awkward I coughed, which reminded me I was fragmenting for want of a cy-gar-ette.

Tarantulas wheeled round and gave an inscrutable grimace with his mandibular features. “Wolfang. Thank you for coming. A very, hehehe, sad business this.”

“It is.” I agreed with the sentiment, but somehow I doubted that *he* did. My nose has never been able to tell me anything about Tarantulas—he smelled of metal and chemicals, and nothing more. I think this is by design. For all I know, I owed Tarantulas for my enhanced sensors along with the stealth armor.

“Yes,” he mused, losing interest in that train of thought. “I've been scanning the data you recovered from the crime scene. It's a shame you weren't able to get a more, hehe, thorough analysis…”

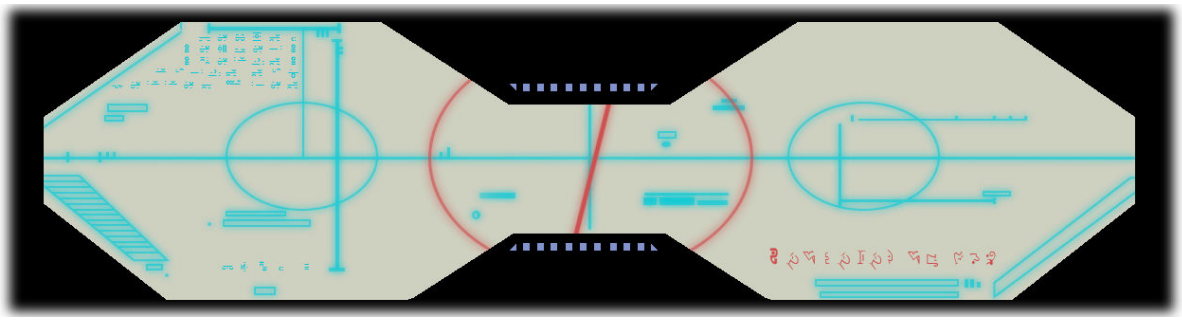
“Well, the bomb rather put paid to that,” I drawled.

“Quite. Well, it seems you were correct in your analysis. The deceased was certainly a Micromaster. Not a very active one, it seems. She doesn't show up in any of our intelligence reports.” Tarantulas fidgeted, his bulky arms twitching about.

“She was new here,” I said, feeling oddly defensive, “and I have information that suggests she was not politically motivated.”

The black and purple bot hunched and stroked his mouth parts, “Hmm… yes it might just be that… there are a couple of other oddities but I'd need more information to be sure. Please relay any of your findings through me as well as Onyx Primal.”

I told him that I would keep him in the loop and excused myself, unable to fully suppress a shudder as the scientist turned away and started humming reedily to himself.



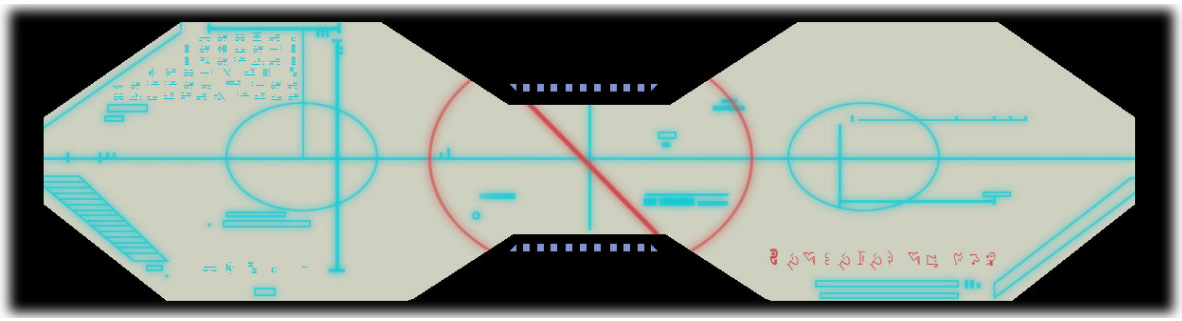
As predicted, the virus had been targeted towards Maximal, specifically MCSF, firmware. I had a similar enough architecture to be affected but not completely. Venus had obviously gleaned a lot of information from me before the firewalls rebuilt themselves, but I had no idea how much. The fact that she probably knew my dual-identity kept pushing itself to the front of my brain module, but there wasn't anything I could do about that right now—what I needed to do was catch up to Venus and the bomber, who might be one and the same.

A call to the station revealed that the security cameras outside the morgue had been strategically wiped. Not surprising, but irritating. They had officers combing the scene for forensics but, with the lab itself as the target, and Lidar and Sitrep missing and dead, respectively, it was slow going. The most interesting thing they had found was a scrap of notation-foil that Sitrep had clasped in his hand as he died. It was badly damaged and simply said “--ings post-forg--” It didn't mean much yet, but I never

rule anything out until I know for sure.

I replayed Sitrep's last moments—the word he'd been trying to say—"Exter…" Exterminate? It hadn't sounded like a threat, and anyway he'd have had no reason to threaten me. I played it again. Twice more. My interrogation software agreed with my instincts—the poor son of a glitch was trying very hard to tell me something, but he did not want me exterminated. He might have been asking me to euthanize him, I supposed, but that didn't feel right. Some other word maybe—external? Exterior? I filed the syllables away for later.

What the virus did give me, however, was an electronic signature. It was just a string of nonsensical equations, clearly supposed to have been wiped with the rest, but it effectively functioned as a calling card for whoever designed it. It only took a few moments of digging in the PSP database to find the designer and as luck would have it, it wasn't some deep cover Resistance operative from No Bot's Land—the virus had been engineered by a software architect who operated right here in Iacon. The database only had a few lines on him—not even a name—just a company called Sparks Of Genius. It mentioned that he moved around a lot but that his latest premises were only a few blocks from The Way Of All Things. I could check them out before Monxo opened—I was eager to shake him down regarding the video of Fennec, but it would do me no good if he wasn't home.



Sparks Of Genius turned out to be a small, grubby warehouse behind a rusty chain-link fence. A brace of hyenabots was mauling a dexi-squirrel in front of the sliding door when I arrived. Once gave me a resentful stare as they slunk off to consume their sparking prey out of sight.

I kept my MCSF credentials low-key and toned down my IFF. I had no idea who this hacker was and I did not want to spook him. The door slid open with a wheeze—motion controlled, evidently.

The inside of the warehouse was dark. Rusted containers loomed out of the dark like forgotten Titans. Some company or other gone bust under Builder rule, now long forgotten.

"Hello?" I called out, experimentally.

A shadow shifted in the spotlight. Filtering out some of the glare I was able to see it was a bot, fairly tall and thin—possibly some kind of Micromaster. *Great, more fragging Builders.* I called out again.

"Yes, yes, come over." I complied. The bot was silver-gray and slightly taller than me. Wings hung from his legs, and he had a nose-cone shaped cranium—a flyer then.

"Hi," I said, "And you would be?"

"Overrun," he said nervously. He had no mouth but his vocoder made everything sound like it was being forced through a nervous smile. The bench behind him was littered with computer equipment and tools as well as, I noticed, a hefty blaster pistol.

"I wondered if you could answer a few questions," I told him, as nonchalantly as possible. "I have a piece of code in my possession I think you might know something about."

Overrun only had a single visor, but there were still lights behind it and I saw them flicking towards the pistol. I grabbed his wrist and twisted, "Here," I said, faux-friendly, "I'll download it to you." I beamed him the signature, wirelessly—felt it set off his recognition software before he could lock it down. "Why'd you do it, Overrun? Are you Resistance?"

He cleared his filters. "Resistance, hardly, I'm just an independent contractor!"

"Oh yeah?" I snarled. Melodramatic, but it tends to work on civilians. "An independent contractor designing viruses to assault MCSF officers?"

His shoulders slumped. "It wasn't like that. She offered so many keys", he waved a hand around the grimy warehouse, "You can tell I'm desperate—she didn't say anything about the MCSF, I swear—she said it was for self-defense!"

I smirked. "That's one bot who doesn't need any help with self-defense." I took an aggressive step towards him, forcing him to back away. The wings on his legs hit a box and knocked it over. "Better get your proximity sensors recalibrated," I taunted. "Let's say I believe you—what have you got on Venus?"

Overrun's mostly immobile brow furrowed as much as it could—"Venus? She told me her name was Elita…"

I slapped him on the back, "See, we're learning already. Let's cut a deal—mind if I smoke?"

He stammered, "Well, actually, some of the equipment is quite…"

“Oh sorry,” I shook my head, “that was a rhetorical question.” I lit a cy-gar-ette and made a show of blowing the smoke around. I don't get a kick out of bullying tech nerds, but I was having a really scrap day and I felt I still had a justifiable reason to be fragged off at Overrun.

He waved it off as though it was no bother, but he did start packing up circuit boards into protective cases as he was talking. “Elita said she was only in town for a little while. She paid in keys, hard currency, not a fund transfer.”

“Any idea where she was staying?”

“It's not the sort of thing I think to ask… Might be you could track her though.”

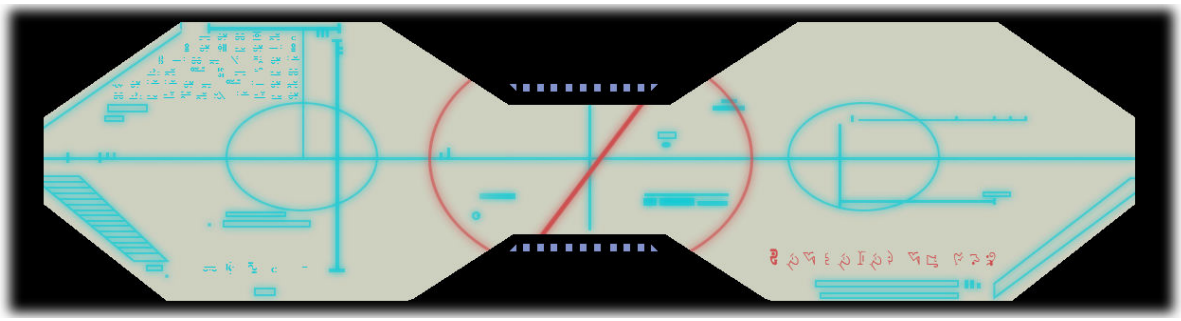
My audio sensors re-tuned at that. “Go on.”

“I didn't just sell her that virus. I recalibrated her entire IFF system and helped her modulate her stealth armor. She'd be nearly impossible to trace after my improvements, unless…” Overrun was talking more eagerly now, less guarded—clearly thinking he'd spotted a route out of this mess other than doing time as a disembodied spark in a filing cabinet.

“Unless what?”

“Unless you had the electronic signature of all her upgrades coded into your GPS and environmental mapping software.”

I grinned, deliberately showing as many spiked fangs as possible. “Thank you, Overrun.”



The Way Of All Things would just be opening for the evening drinkers now so after setting my sensors to continually scan for Venus/Elita's signature I transformed and headed back to the bar as quickly as possible. I skidded to a halt in the lubricant and sulfur-smelling alley behind the dive and resumed robot mode, booting the rickety back door in and yelling, “MCSF, stay where you are!” I was fond of the place, but the Confederacy has a saying that seemed to apply—“you can't make a Eutychus Vessel

without piercing a painstakingly bio-engineered ovum.” I'm sure it's snappier in Terran.

My dramatic entrance was spoiled slightly by the fact that Monxo a) did not look even slightly perturbed, and b) was alone except for a half-dead looking old Empty who had probably been propping up the bar since the night before. He might literally have been propping it up, given the state of disrepair that pervaded the place. Monxo had once tried to claim to me that he was only being true to the spirit of entropy in the name.

“Officer,” the Cyberdroid said genially, conveniently seeming to forget he had seen me beaten half to stasis lock outside his bar the night before.

“Where is Fennec?” I growled, slamming my armored fist down on the bar, which resonated, throwing up a film of orange rust. The Empty's optics whirred to life and he gave a low moan before swigging another gulp of watery engex and falling back into catatonia.

“Who?” Monxo spread his arms wide and feigned a look of puzzlement.

I wasn't having any of it. I grabbed him round the throat and dragged him up to the bar before shoving him backwards. Kegs and canisters rattled and fell. “Hey!” he yelped, “This is brutality. I've got a hotline to Strongarm you know!”

“Just try it,” I said. “Strongarm lost a neural cluster in an attack this morning; an attack I'm pretty sure your pal Fennec was involved in. If you think you're going to get a lot of sympathy from her, I'm afraid you're mistaken.” I jabbed him under the chin. “Where. Is. Fennec?” I demanded, punctuating each word with another prod.

“OK, OK. Cool your ramjets. Honestly if it isn't the damned Predacons it's you lot!” Monxo shook his head and started to clear up, muttering to himself, “I don't know Fennec that well. He's in here sometimes…”

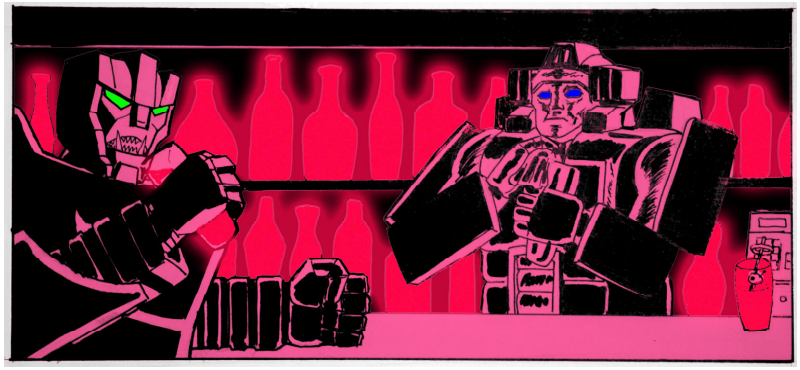
“But you know the name? You know him well enough to help him and Venus stage an ambush?”

He looked genuinely confused for the first time, “Who?”

“Don't pull that scrap with me Monxo. They were both in here last night.”

His face fell, “Oh, Elita? I know Elita, I admit it, but they don't know each other—or if they do, they don't work together.”

This was new—my working theory had been that Fennec had beaten me



up to warn me off the case and that Venus had taken advantage of my weakness to hit me with the virus.

"Keep talking," I said, letting my tone soften a little.

"Now, I don't know Elita real well," he said, even as his optics took on a glazed look, "but I'd bet scraplets to plain old scrap that she's Resistance. She's got the look, and some of the questions she asks…"

"Sure, sure," I hurried him, "We know Fennec is Resistance too, so why do you think they don't know each other?"

Monxo actually laughed at that. "Are you serious? Fennec's not one of Lio Convoy's Pit-damned rebels—he's Mayhem Attack Squad—a Predacon Supremacy nut."

"You're lying," I said before I realized that Monxo had no idea I had access to the Mandala's files and it probably wouldn't help me much if he found out.

"Heh, believe what you want," he said, "but Fennec's a Mayhemist as sure as the oversized chin on your faceplate, and what's more, you'd better duck."

"Huh?" I asked, only to be answered by a massive armored fist colliding with the back of my head.

Warning sensors rang alarms in my brain module while repair nanites rushed to the source of the blow. I slid into combat mode and half turned, half rolled, snatching the Empty's half-finished canister of engex and smashing it against my attacker. He reeled backwards and gave me time to get into a fighting stance. It was Fennec, which didn't shock me.

"I'm coming for you next, Monxo!" he roared, flicking a switch on his forearm and ejecting a short but nasty-looking punch dagger. "You can't hide from me."

"Oh, hi Fennec," I greeted him as I edged backwards, "How's the eye?" He roared in fury and charged. I went for my blaster but he was too quick, sending it flying across the bar with a blow from his left arm even as he followed up with the dagger. I sprang backwards, dodged sideways to avoid the blade, and fetched him an uppercut to his snaggle-toothed grin. He yelped and swung the blade underarm, stitching a line in my paintwork with an audio-sensor-piercing shriek.

Dodging again, I snatched up a nearby barstool and fended off his attacks until it shattered into three pieces. Proximity sensors blared and I glanced backwards. I was fast running out of room. Only one thing for it. I charged, fast and low. He was half-ready for me and the dagger scored a sparking wound in my shoulder. It hurt like hell but I kept going, gathering him round the waist and slamming him to the floor in an ungainly, but effective, dump-tackle. I kicked the knife away and stamped down hard on his chest module, where his spark-container would be.

Trying to ignore the energon leaking from my pierced shoulder I spat a gob of mech-fluid and said, with more authority than I felt, "You're done Fennec. Talk!"

To my amazement and intense annoyance, he laughed. "You're a joke, Wolfang. By the time you get the punchline, Cybertron's going to be ours." His optics rolled back and focused at a spot on the bar ceiling—a spot of dirt, most likely.

"What do the Mayhemists want with me?" I asked him, "Why did they kill Twirl?"

He grinned that infuriating grin, "You're not getting anything from me. It wasn't us that killed that girl."

"Then *WHO*?"

"Blow it out your exhaust port." His body slumped somewhat and went settled as the light went out in his optics—voluntary stasis lock. *Damn it.*

I told Monxo to bring me a drink and a cy-gar-ette, as well as the crude first aid kit he kept behind the bar. It was a pretty cheap bonding agent but it filled the gash while the nanites began their work—stung like the Pit, though.

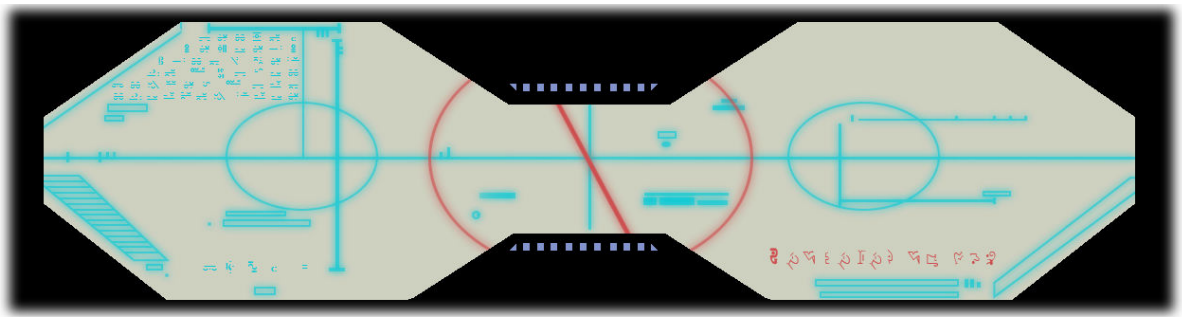
Fennec had a few small compartments built into his upper-thighs. They mostly contained money, various scraps of simultronics, and a couple of vials of nuke. Of interest, however, was a holo-card bearing the fearsomely exaggerated image of a purple Builder with enormous gold teeth on his chest. It bore the legend "Cybertron Is For Predacons" and a few numbers that my mapping software told me corresponded to a location on the Vos-Iacon border. I set a way-point and de-powered the card.

I called in Fennec's location and condition to Aura, who promised to send a containment team right away. I thought about informing Onyx, but it was him who had given me the faulty information about Fennec being a member of the Resistance, and I still wasn't sure what to make of that. Monxo assured me he had *no* idea what the Mayhemists might have had to do with Twirl and looked none too happy about having me hang around with the unconscious Predacon

waiting for the pick-up team. He kept muttering about “damages” and “whiplash”. I re-opened Fennec's money compartment and handed him a few bronze 50-CPK Prowl coins—he shut up after that.

The containment team arrived and I told them who Fennec was, eliciting sighs all round. “Honestly,” Stopgap said, “these sad pieces of scrap must have been lubricating all over themselves when Lio Convoy slagged that Builder. They'd been writing manifestos with their pistons in their servos, oiling their crankshafts over Predacon manifest destiny and this ‘inferior’ Maximal had the bearings to do what they could only blog about,” he spat. “Don't worry, he won't look quite this peaceful when we power him back up.”

I nodded and thanked him, “Just be careful,” I said, pointing to my various scraps and cuts, “he's got a mean right-hook. Keep the stasis cuffs on.”



The highway was dark and almost deserted as I made my way to the edge of Iacon. The further you got from the center the less reliable the neons were and the frequency of abandoned or semi-abandoned neighborhoods increased. Even the MCSF didn't get out this far very often. Nobody lives here who report anything to the authorities, and the PSP simply doesn't care—there isn't any useful information. It was, in short, the perfect place to hide the gathering of a racist hate-group with designs on becoming the city's latest in a depressingly long line of paramilitary cells.

As I travelled I mulled the case over. Sitrep had obviously been trying to give me some kind of message. I had my language probability matrix crunch the letters on his note. “Things post-forgotten.” Didn't really mean anything, “Buildings post-forgone,” - still nonsense. Something struck me about my image of Twirl. Mentally I keyed in “Wings” as the first word. It came back straight away. “Wings post-forged.” Twirl's alt-mode wasn't her original. I thought back to my encounter with Hotwire the previous solar cycle: it was a disguise, the sort that Hotwire specialized in.

I pulled over three blocks away from the warehouse corresponding to the coordinates on the card. I killed my engine and assumed my Maximal form, then made my way on foot to the warehouse, sticking

to the shadows to avoid drawing attention. Though the sun had set moments before, there were no lights on anywhere in the neighborhood, including the building in question. That didn't necessarily mean anything, but my gut told me there was no one home-not yet. It was possible some lunatic was inside, lurking in the darkness, but doubtful. I could search, and risk alerting them to my presence if they had left a sensor I didn't find, or stake out the place. I opted for the latter.

I considered radioing for backup as I looked for an unobtrusive vantage point. I had pretty solid evidence that the Mayhem Attack Squad was involved somewhere, and if Fennec was anything to go by they were unlikely to come quietly. I abandoned these plans immediately, however, when my GPS began to bleep—Venus was close by. I had studiously left Venus out of my reports to both Aura and Onyx so far. The last thing I needed right now was for her to come to the attention of either, knowing my secret.

I triangulated her position to the top of an abandoned high rise, about a hic-and-a-half due west. Unsurprisingly, this building overlooked the coordinates for what I assumed was the Mayhemist headquarters. Backtracking, I sneaked as quickly and quietly as I could to the building. I took the rusty, acid-damaged stairs silently, blaster at the ready. Venus had set proximity sensors halfway up and just at the top, but I was able to smell the adhesive she had used to stick them to the walls and disable them with a tiny focused electromagnetic pulse.

The door to the roof terrace was open and I could see Venus' back as she crouched, staring intently, long-barreled blaster rifle by her side. She wore an old nano-weave blanket over her head and shoulders, shielding her paintwork from the drizzle, keeping her covered with my own side-arm I cleared my filters with a cough.

Dropping the blanket, Venus wheeled round and actually had the decency to look properly shocked. "You found me. How?"

"Trade secret," I said, tapping my nose. "Mind telling me what you're doing up here?"

She smiled ruefully, cocking her head on one side. "Yeah, I kind of do. Are you going to arrest me?"

"Let's find out. First let's see if I can guess what's going on."

"I'm all audio sensors, but hurry it up, I'm sure we've both got places to be."

"OK, Monxo was pretty sure you're Resistance—he knows his clientele and after that stunt you pulled on me back at my apartment, I'm pretty sure he's right."

Venus shrugged. "Believe what you want." That was all the

confirmation I needed.

“I think you knew Twirl, but not as well as you wanted to. You liked her, I believe you're that sincere at least, and you didn't kill her. In fact, I think you're here looking to take revenge on the group that did.”

Venus put her hand on her hip and regarded me coolly. “I hope you're not going to try to stop me. The Mayhemists are scum whichever way you cut it. I'd be doing you a favor.” I could see the rage in her then. She was good, an expert at emotion control, but she had to fight to maintain the air of detachment. It didn't fool me, but then I'm hard to fool.

“I think Twirl was your mission in Iacon. I think you wanted to recruit her. Having a Builder actually join your cause would be worth a lot of cachet. The Mayhemists took that from you.”

Venus seemed to be considering telling me something, but let the moment pass. “You’re warm. Are we there yet?” she snapped, effecting a bored tone on the last two words.

“Nearly. You knew the mission was a bust as soon as Twirl's body was discovered. You bought the virus from Overrun to try to take me out of the equation and blew up the morgue to slow down the investigation. Then you tracked the Mayhemists here.”

She nodded, “Slightly cooler than last time. So, are you going to help me take them down, or at least get out of my way?”

Red targeting matrices lined up with the joints in Venus' armor as well as vulnerable spots like her optics and the power source of her rifle. I adjusted the grip on my blaster. “I can't let you do that Venus. You're a suspect in a bombing and, officially, the murder of a Builder. You've got to come with me.” At some point while we were talking the churning weather system that had been threatening to hit Iacon for days had moved from the omnipresent drizzle—spattering warm drops of acid rain onto the rust-pocked tower-block. I wiped a stinging gob from my optic and felt the filing-choked wind whip around us as I waited for her response.

“This is *such* a mistake, Wolfang!” she pleaded, raising her voice above the storm. “I don't want to hurt you but I will.”

“Like you didn't want to hurt me with your virus?” I asked, mockingly. “You're full of scrap Venus. I've got a dozen targeting solutions on you, and I've got a channel back to Strongarm at headquarters on standby. You can't win this.”

“You forget, Wolfy, I know your dirty little secret. Fine, you got me; I'm Resistance. I was here for Twirl, which led me to you. I tried to shoot two Builders with one laser, get you off the Twirl case and evaluate you as an asset. MCSF is always useful, but

PSP?" She smiled, cruelly. "All of which means I could end your career, and probably your life, with a single anonymous transmission."

I shrugged, "Do it then. I can't stop you, I've made my peace with that. Either way I'm going to end this here." After stellar cycles of divided loyalties and keeping secrets, the idea that my fate was totally out of my hands was relieving, almost empowering. "Besides, call me crazy, but I don't think you want to do that."

Her optics darted left and right as she looked for an opening, but she knew I was right—I had the drop on her. "OK," she said, looking defeated, "I'm taking a huge gamble here, but it's the only option I've got left. Give me a few nanokliks before you decide what to do."

I acquiesced—never could resist a pretty face. "Twirl wasn't my mission because she's a Builder. You've looked yourself. She's practically unknown, not politically active—no cachet there—and that's how she wanted it."

"I don't understand," I said, before my desire to retain the upper hand managed to stop me.

"You will," Venus assured me. "The Resistance had intelligence that Twirl was a very special individual. Someone who could play a major role in the war. I was sent to recruit her, not to kill her. The Mayhem Attack Squad seemed to have similar ends, only apparently without the 'not killing' caveat."

"Special, how?"

"Twirl's exo-frame had properties we thought had been rendered, quite deliberately, extinct. She was a Targetmaster—a living weapon."

I accessed my history files, although I hardly needed to—every-bot knew the stories. Micromaster sized bots who could comingle the power of their own sparks with those of the bots who carried them to wield incredible destructive energies—punching holes through dedicated siege defenses, shooting ships out of orbit. They were massacred before the end of the war—an incident known to history as the Targetmaster Extirpation…

Extirpation… damn it!

"He knew! Sitrep figured out Twirl was."

Venus furrowed her brow, "What?"

"That's why you killed him when you blew up the morgue. He wasn't threatening me or asking me to kill him, he was trying to tell me that the Extirpation wasn't complete—that some of the

Targetmasters survived!" It explained the post-forged flight mode as well. I could hardly think of a bot who would more want to hide their true identity than a surviving Targetmaster.

Venus started to walk towards me, seemingly unworried by the blaster I had trained on her, "Wolfang, believe me, I did not blow up your morgue. It was most likely the Mayhemists. Another reason we have to check them off, but most importantly, we don't know how much they know. If they have detailed scans of Twirl's body they might be able to reproduce the technology, and then we're all in trouble, starting with Iacon."

I paced, feeling the sting of the rain on the knife wound in my shoulder. It was a lot to take in, but if Venus was right, we really didn't have a moment to lose—if they backed up the blueprints or transmitted them elsewhere, we were already finished.

"Venus, I…"

She placed a slender finger over her lips, "Don't call me that anymore. I have a real name; one you probably already know."

My memory banks had been working through the recent history of the Uprising since I had confirmed Venus was Resistance. I filled in the rest using a probability based search. "Blackarachnia—you're one of Lio Convoy's inner circle."

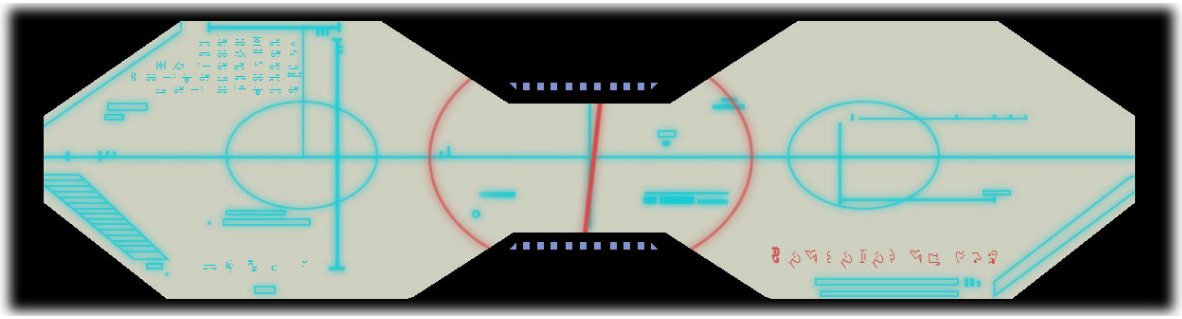
"In the living metal," she said. "If you write that name in a report… I… won't actually care because I'll be long gone, deal?"

I'd been used to shades of gray for a long time. Working with someone I knew was a Resistance fighter went against both sets of my programming, but I was certain Blackarachnia would not have stayed in Iacon so long if she didn't believe that the Mayhemists were a real threat. All things considered I didn't really have a choice.

"OK, deal," I said. "Mind if I have a cy-gar-ette first?"

"Only if you've got one for me."

So we smoked, hunched in silence beneath Blackarachnia's poncho in the rain, watching the warehouse for two megacycles as we waited for signs of life. Aura tried to call me a couple of times but I ignored her—the acid storm would give me a pretty good excuse.



The convoy arrived sometime in the middle of the third megacycle. It consisted of four bots with truck modes and a helicopter providing an escort. Blackarachnia was moving before I could say anything—her sniper shot punched the tire of the lead vehicle and he transformed with a snarled curse when the other three rammed into him. Not stopping to see the effects, she shrugged off the blanket, vaulted the railing and swallow dived towards the ground, transforming into her two-wheeled vehicle mode at the last second.

I felt slow and awkward compared to her. I rattled a couple of shots off at the helicopter, which spun round and unleashed its Gatling cannon at the top of the tower-block. I dived for cover as the rusty stairwell was chewed to shrapnel.

My still active tracking on Blackarachnia told me that she had swerved away from the convoy and convinced one of the trucks to give chase. He lumbered clumsily along the slick streets as she weaved this way and that. I concentrated on the flyer, managing to squeeze a shot off that holed a fuel tank. Energon spilled into the air. A second shot set off a chain reaction and he exploded, a flaming wreck, pin-wheeling sideways out of the sky. Setting my limbs for maximum torque, I leapt off the tower.

The Predacon that Blackarachnia had shot was still down, clutching his wound and groaning. The other two had retreated into the warehouse proper. I switched the blaster to stun and shot the luckless Mayhemist in the throat—his guard was down and he looked almost grateful to go into stasis lock.

I approached the warehouse with caution, knowing full well that I was outnumbered by at least two to one, and possibly even more than that. Blackarachnia was still tied up in her vehicular duel, and while I was fairly confident she would eventually win, I couldn't count on her support any-time soon.

The warehouse was bigger and more airy than the one housing Sparks Of Genius had been. In addition to the mandatory shipping containers and packing crates, there were also banks of computer equipment. I realized with shock that some were still displaying schematics of parts of Twirl's inner workings.

I couldn't see the Mayhemists, so my guard was up. I slipped into

infra-red vision and subconsciously locked my gun arm to my head movements, automatically training my blaster on anything I scanned optically.

The particle beam whipped from behind a packing crate and caught me in the knee. Damage control systems kicked in immediately and stymied some of the shock, but the joint still exploded with pain and I tumbled to the filthy ground, firing wildly. My clumsy collapse was the only thing that saved me as two more beams crackled through the air where my cranial module had been.

I flicked my blaster to maximum yield and fired at the container they were using for cover. The concussive force ripped great holes in the corrugated metal and flipped the container over, forcing my attackers to scurry for fresh cover. Firing like that would drain my weapon's cells fast, but it achieved the desired result.

Damage control told me I could walk, or at least limp, so I took advantage of their confusion and staggered to my feet, half-running, half-diving behind a stack of drums.

Trying to figure out how to get out of this, I scanned the local area for comms signals to see if I could use them to keep track of the Mayhemists. They were efficient, communicating sub-vocally to try to cut me off, but my enhanced olfactory abilities helped me keep track of them—Mayhemists were not big on regular hygienic maintenance it seemed—who knew? One was slowly circling 'round behind me, the other was trying to get to a high gantry to provide covering fire. I pulled the lid from one of the drums and held it high over my head as a makeshift shield, electing to ignore the climbing attacker and scan for the bot trying to outflank me. As I kept trying to tune in on their ever shifting radio chatter another voice cut through the static.

"Don't just stand there," the voice cackled, "close in. Take him apart and bring me what's left!"

That almost sounded like…

"Tarantulas, it's not that easy, he's dug in, he's…" the Mayhemist was cut off in mid-sentence by my blaster shot, which entered one shoulder and burst out the other side of his neck, practically decapitating him. It was a survivable wound if a medic got to him fast, but he wouldn't be talking anytime soon.

I flung the drum lid away, making a crash which distracted the other Predacon. Furious at hearing the science officer's voice over my enemies' comms, I vaulted my cover and started to limp towards the Mayhemist. He was so surprised that his first shot missed completely and his second only clipped my already injured arm. My aim was true and the stun blast caught him right in his spark chamber—instant stasis lock. He tumbled from the gantry and clattered to the deck without bouncing, a broken heap.

Immediately I flicked my comms, “Tarantulas!” I called, “Come out now and we can talk!”

The sinister chuckle, already too familiar, was transformed in this place from oddball quirk to cold and threatening. “My, but you're a persistent one, Wolfang. Very persistent. I should have known my allies wouldn't be able to hold you.”

“Come out, Tarantulas!” I scanned frantically left and right, trying to ignore the mech-fluid dribbling from my shoulder and knee.

“Heh, heh,” he rasped. “Maybe, maybe not.” The voice came from all around, above, below. It was still being broadcast wirelessly—he might not be in the room at all, and yet I sensed that he was.

“I always knew you were a creepy son of a glitch, Tarantulas,” I goaded, “But I never thought you'd be this unimaginative? A Mayhemist, really?”

I could sense the smile in his voice as he replied, “Useful foot-soldiers, nothing more. Happy to do the legwork for a share in the new order.”

An upper window shutter broke in and Blackarachnia’s vehicle mode screeched to a halt on the rickety gantry. She transformed and vaulted to my level, landing catlike. “Finally got him,” she panted. “Where are they?”

I put my finger to my lips and signaled for her to scan the room, “They're down,” I tightbeamed, “but Tarantulas is here. He's behind it all. We've got to bring him in.”

“Or kill him,” Blackarachnia said, simply.

The ubiquitous voice chuckled again, “Such spirit. I can see why Lio Convoy keeps you around.”

“I take it you planted the false information about Fennec being Resistance?” I asked, hoping to keep him talking.

“Of course. It didn't last as long as I'd hoped, unfortunately. Monxo needs to remember who his friends are. I think I'll remind him after we finish here…”

Proximity sensors went wild as the scientist detached himself from the shadow of an enormous piece of equipment and landed with a clang between me and Blackarachnia. Both arms shot out, one expertly piercing my wounded shoulder and hurling me to the floor in a pained heap. Blackarachnia was slightly more ready, managing to deflect Tarantulas with blows of her own and aim a spiked kick at his throat. He dodged backwards and blocked, before arming a

clawed slash across her face. She arched her flexible struts and leant backwards away from the blow, taking only superficial damage to her torso, then brought her knee up again and buried it in his hip joint.

I tried to take this opportunity to grab my blaster, which had fallen just out of reach, but the Predacon science chief noticed and stamped down hard on my hand, buckling the fingers. Nanites started to tell me about tearing and micro-fractures—with irrational anger I wondered what they thought I could do about it right now.

Blackarachnia and Tarantulas were meeting each other blow for blow, trading moves from some form of metallikato I had only seen in entertainment vids about the Cyber-Ninja Corps of Cybertron's heyday. I had quite a few hand-to-hand combat applications in my programming, but they tended towards the 'cold-cock to the jaw and kick in the bearings' style that worked on addicts and street toughs—this was an art form.

Blackarachnia ducked into a fighting crouch, sweeping for Tarantulas' leg as he lunged forward. He pivoted and caught her ankle joint with his claw, hoisting it into the air as he turned away. Blackarachnia screamed in frustration as she lost her footing and clanged flat on her back onto the rust-streaked floor.

Tarantulas' mouth parts quivered with excitement as he anticipated his victory, then transformed the hand sections of both arms into clawed pieces of dissection equipment. They whirred and clicked as Blackarachnia tried to back away.

I managed to divert some energon and power away from my wounded joints and stem the flow of mech-fluid somewhat. I felt impossibly slow as I levered myself off the floor and limped as quietly as I

could towards the ranting scientist. “Resistance fools!” he raved, “you thought you could stop this stratagem that I have had in place for decades? You are nothing to me! Nothing!”

“Well, I said,” appearing behind him, “How about this for something?” He wheeled, evidently surprised I was even mobile. Before he could react I aimed a crashing head-butt. His domed cranium cracked in a spider-web pattern as he reeled backwards thrashing about. “Tarantulas of Iacon,” I said, aiming a left hook to the shoulder that caused his arm to go limp. I was in full-on brawling mode now. It wasn't pretty—all elbows, knees, and forehead—but it had got me through some tricky spots in the past. Close in I was unbeatable. “You are under arrest for terrorism, arms dealing, conspiracy to cause a breach of the Pax Cybertronia, and the murder of a Builder.” Blackarachnia was up now and slid in to trip Tarantulas, who fell, hard. Spitting out a piece of broken mandible he lay still, laughing to himself.

“Murder of a Builder?” he chuckled, “Nothing to do with me, I'm afraid; I thought you knew I always prefer my subjects… alive.” he said the last word with far too much relish.

Blackarachnia aimed a kick at his cracked head armor. My burst of power was wearing off and I hadn't the energy to stop her. “Then WHO?” she screamed, “Who killed Twirl?”

Tarantulas gave an infuriating shrug. “We assumed it was the Resistance. Apparently we were wrong.”

I indicated the dormant Mayhemists, “You know, Tarantulas, I used to be a lot like these sad sacks of scrap—all eager to volunteer for the program—strike a blow from within against the hated Maximal oppressors, but you know what happened? I got tired, the Builders were keeping everyone down and nothing ever changed—over time I realized I liked working murders more than I liked screwing over my friends—at least it actually seemed to make a difference. What happened to you?”

He laughed that deranged laugh, “Me? I never gave a scrap about either side to begin with.” And he kept laughing until I knocked him into stasis lock.
Wearily I stasis-cuffed Tarantulas to a dormant piece of loading equipment and radioed our position to the PSP. They tended to be ruthless with traitors, and I really didn't want MCSF officers asking questions about my involvement

I smoked and fretted while waiting on the pick-up team. It had taken all of my pull with Onyx Primal to get anyone to believe that Tarantulas had turned on us. Onyx was going to have his work cut out in the deca-cycles ahead, weeding out anyone else that Tarantulas had drawn into his web.

Blackarachnia put a hand on my good shoulder. “You did everything

you could," she said, "You stopped him. Believe me, if he'd gotten hold of a Targetmaster—there's nobody out there with the tech to stand against that."

Something had been bothering me. "Tell me, Blackarachnia, if you had managed to have the conversation with Twirl, about joining you, and she had declined, would you have killed her to stop her joining anyone else?"

She hung her head, looked away. "My orders were to use my discretion."

"I think I know you well enough now to take that as a 'yes'."

"Believe what you want Wolfang. I heard what you said to Tarantulas. Where do you get off on the moral high-ground anyway, playing the good soldier to both sides? Picking up a paycheck, solving murders like it's a hobby. How long do you think that's going to last when we're at your gates?" She snorted out a humorless laugh, "You've walked this tightrope for too long."

It was something I had been thinking about ever since the start of this case. Before that, probably. "Maybe you're right." A pause. "You'd better get out of here and I need you to know, if you lot finally get through Vos and bring the fight to Iacon, whichever side I decide to work for, I am going to fight you every step of the way."

She laughed, grinned a genuine smile. "I wouldn't accept anything less. See you around, Wolfy, hopefully not when my unit overruns your turbofox-hole." She started to walk away—I've seen worse sights. Something was bothering me though—something about the story didn't add up.

"Blackarachnia!" I called, before she could transform. "How did you meet Overrun?"

"Huh?" She looked confused. "Twirl introduced us, said they were old friends."

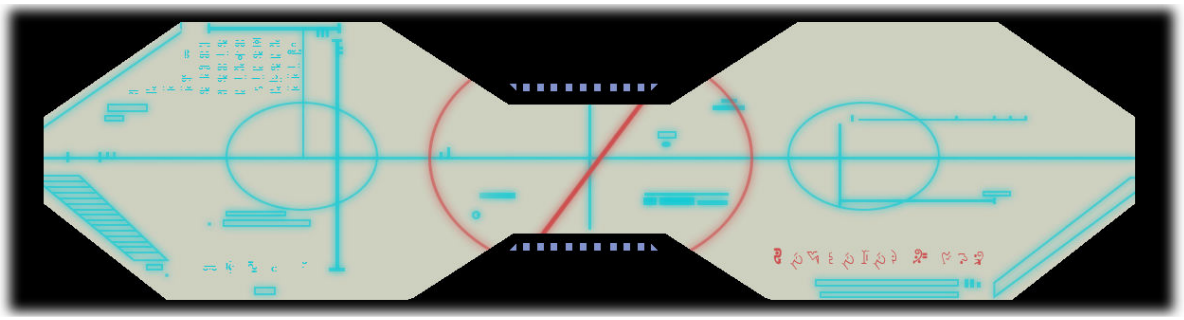
"And you didn't think that was odd at all? A party girl like Twirl being friends with a shut-in tech geek like Overrun?"

She raised a curved eyebrow. "Old Builders' network? What are you getting at Wolfang?"

"I need to wait for the containment team. Start making your way back to Iacon. I'll meet you near Sparks Of Genius. If I'm right, that's where you'll get your justice for Twirl."

"I don't understand, what are you…?" Over the sound of the storm I heard rotor blades, and over the smell of the spilled mech-fluid and acid rain I detected fresh exhaust.

“They're here, Blackarachnia, and they will shoot you on sight. Go now and I'll catch up.”



I supervised the containment personally. It took almost a megacycle of explaining as well as replaying my optical recordings of events to convince my PSP colleagues that Tarantulas had to be taken with the rest of the Mayhemists. By the time I managed to extricate myself, I scanned for Blackarachnia and found she was nowhere in range. I buzzed her on comms—no reply.

I transformed to interceptor mode and drove as fast as I dared across town. I didn't want to attract any unnecessary attention from my friends in the MCSF, so I had to stick to speed limits and back routes. In addition, my wounds were still very much a going concern and made my vehicle mode slow and unstable. I wanted backup, but also knew I needed to keep the MCSF in the dark as much as possible. I sent a burst to Aura asking her to send a squad to The Way Of All Things—close enough if I needed them, far enough if I didn’t.

There was no sign of the Resistance fighter in the dark around Sparks Of Genius so I edged open the door and snuck inside. Overrun was working at his little bench, counting out loud as he completed a piece of equipment, “One, two, three,”

I crept closer. “That's far enough!” The voice did not come from the figure at the workbench. I turned to the left and found myself looking straight into Overrun's heavy, snub-nosed blaster pistol—the one I had noticed earlier. “Drop your weapon.”

I crouched and carefully placed my own gun on the floor, kicking it away when instructed. My PSP software assessed my tactical options, but there were none—he had the drop on me.

“I knew it would work, Lidar—our body-shapes were similar enough.” The robot at the bench carried on, working and mumbling numbers without acknowledging our presence. Overrun shrugged, “You'll have to excuse my friend here—he's not been feeling *himself* recently—Robo-Smasher technology will do that to a person.”

My circuits went cold at the mention of the Robo-Smasher—a machine

rumored to have been used by Megatron himself during the Great War. It could zip a Cybertronian's entire core programming and encase it in a shell—as cybernetic lifeforms we are always at the mercy of our software, and the Robo-Smasher had no mercy.

“Lidar bombed the MCSF for you.”

Overrun nodded. “Yes, he had actually been in my *employ* for some time, keeping me out of MCSF records. It was sheer luck his partner caught the autopsy, really.”

“Where's Blackarachnia?” I needed to know she was safe before I could confront him about anything else.

“I'm here, Wolfang,” I heard her call out. I looked up and saw she had been enmeshed in a web of chains dangling from an old non-sentient crane unit. She looked functional, if battered.

“I'm right then,” I said, “you killed Twirl.”

“I'm afraid so. I was glitching with worry when you came ‘round to ask about the virus, but you didn't seem to have put anything together.” He waved the gun at me nervously, but didn't move it far enough to give me an opening, “Mind if I ask how you figured it out?”

“Three things. One: your name.” I said, “You've clearly got an aerial alt-mode, which would make “Overrun” an incongruous designation. Added to that you're a programmer, which also has nothing to do with the name “Overrun”. Your name spells a 'bot who wanted to disappear and took on the most abstract identity he could. Two: your wings. Your proximity sensor doesn’t include them, does it? That’s why you knocked into those boxes with them when I distracted you. A body mod, meaning your whole alt-mode is a cheap disguise, and not the ‘Robots In’ kind. . And then, three: when Blackarachnia here confirmed that you and Twirl knew each other, well, knowing what we now know about Twirl, it seemed obvious—you're another Targetmaster. You looked out for one another, you shared useful contacts like our friend Hotwire, you helped each other pick out new alt-modes to stay one step ahead, until you killed her.”

Overrun sighed—it made him sound old and weary. “To my enduring torment, yes. The Extirpation was a brutality beyond imagination. We were offered exile and only given death. The techno-organic among us, the Humans and Nebulans, would have all be long dead by now anyway, but we were all of us hunted to extinction. Back when I was called Surge, I was partners with the Autobot leader.”

“You mean—”

He nodded. “Yeah. Him. After his death, I kept in touch with what remained of the Autobot leadership. Hyperfire, Blurr's old head,

warned me, Haywire, Offshoot, a few others of the horrors to come. After the implications of our creation became known."

I shook my head, "A bigger gun, so what?"

"Didn't Tarantulas tell you?" he asked incredulously. "Our firepower is a smokescreen—potent, yes, in the wrong hands, but it's not the main reason we were feared."

"What then?"

"Our ability to draw power from sparks; our own, yes, but also our hosts. Thunderwing perfected a method to amplify this ability to the extent that we could be used to drain Cybertronians of life merely through proximity, before he went all Grand Mal on us. That's why, when the Pax came down, the Extirpation happened as a precursor to the peace accords."

"Did you know about this?" I asked Blackarachnia. "Were you planning to use Twirl this way?" She did not reply.

"Thought so." I said, and punched Overrun in the visor, gambling that the surprise would be enough to keep him from shooting me point-blank. I lost the bet—he fired and blew a chunk out of my chest armor, exposing clicking servos, sparking conduits and a cloying scent. I cut off power and mech-fluid flow to that section and concentrated on keeping myself mobile, bundling him inelegantly to the ground.

"Twirl get too big for you, too loud?" I asked him, holding his gun as far away as I could with my injured arm, "Did she threaten to give away your secret?"

"She didn't understand!" he wailed, "After three centuries, she was tired of hiding, thought no one would be looking. I tried to warn her, but she didn't listen. When the Secret Police and the Resistance started nosing around, I had no choice. How can you not see?"

"People are *dead*, Overrun! I can't imagine what you've been through, but you've killed innocents and you've used your viruses to corrupt more. You turned Lidar into a killer just to preserve your identity."

"But this was for Cybertron!" He squirmed but I wouldn't let him escape.

"I don't give a scrap about Cybertron. Cybertron's a corrupt, violent scrapheap run by oligarchs and warmongers. I only care about Iacon. You really fragged up when you brought this scrap to my town!"

"This is so short-sighted!" he cried, accidentally knocking the

pistol further away.

“You're damned right it is!” I shouted in his face, “If you really cared about the greater good you'd have killed yourself stellar cycles ago, but instead you fight and murder and violate to carry on your own worthless existence.”

That evidently angered him. His strength increased noticeably and he levered me off him. “If you'd known what they did to us!” he roared.

“What they did to you? Sitrep, Lidar, Twirl? What exactly did they do? Did they organize the Extirpation? Were they in the execution squads? What did they do, Overrun?”

He sagged, defeated. I swept the gun up and stowed it in a thigh compartment, letting him sit back against a packing container, slumped.

“What are you going to do with him?” Blackarachnia asked, “You can't give him to the PSP or the MCSF.”

“I'm working on it,” I said, but I had nothing.

“Better work fast!” she shouted, “Engines!”

She was right, jet engines and rotor blades heralded the arrival of the PSP. They must have tracked us here. The upstairs window erupted inwards and Onyx Primal transformed from his stealth-bomber mode and landed in front of me in a perfectly-controlled crouch. I couldn't believe my optics—directly following him was Tarantulas, free.

“You were in on this?” I asked, incredulous.

“Tarantulas has explained the misunderstanding,” Onyx told me. “Hand the prisoner over, and this Resistance scrap, and we might be able to find a way to overlook your… indiscretions.”

“What could he possibly have told you?” I demanded, clutching my sparking chest in pain with the effort.

Tarantulas transformed and pointed a clawed finger at me. “I told him you were illegally giving asylum to a bot classed as a weapon of mass, hehehe, destruction by the Pax Cybertronia and the Terran Confederacy.”

“A WMD you wanted to duplicate for your own ends!”

“There was no evidence of that,” Onyx rumbled, “Tarantulas has served the PSP loyally for decades, whereas you, it seems, have made up the rules as you went along. Hand over the prisoner and your badge. Your undercover assignment with the MCSF is over.”

I kept backing away, slowly moving my hand to my comms button, “Oh yeah?” I asked, “Well, better end it quick because the MCSF are coming here.” I pressed the emergency frequency—the button we rarely used, the one that meant, “Officer down, send all units!”

“Overrun, GO!” I shouted. He dived into the shadows even as Tarantulas' energy beam blew another chunk from my torso and slammed me against the wall. I fired back, winging Onyx, and rolled painfully out of sight.

Sirens sounded outside as Aura and her officers left the bar a few blocks away. In the confusion, Blackarachnia had got free and she landed beside me, finger on her lips. “I don't know if that was brave or foolish, Wolfang.”

There was a roar of jets and a crash as Overrun transformed to his makeshift flight mode and boosted out of the closed skylight. “Track him!” I yelled.

“Already on it.” Blackarachnia transformed. “Get on,” she ordered, “you're in no condition to drive yourself.”

Not stopping to argue, I swung my legs into her passenger seat and she blasted off at top speed.

Onyx roared as we power-slid past him and out the front entrance. He and Tarantulas were about to give chase when the whirling of sirens signaled the arrival of the MCSF.

“That should buy as some time!” I shouted to Blackarachnia as we roared onto the storm-soaked highway.

“What are you going to do when we catch up with him?” she asked.

“I've no idea,” I admitted. “I know for a fact that we can't let the PSP have him. He might be safer with the MCSF, but fundamentally they answer to the Builders. I wouldn't want to bet on it. Where's he heading?”

I hung on as Blackarachnia picked up speed, “Out of the city, south. He's going down though. His alt-mode is a cheap disguise. I'm guessing he doesn't have the range for a long flight.”

Vos.

I heard the scream of engines as Onyx Primal circled overhead in bomber mode. Tarantulas would be crouched atop him like a hunched arachnotron.

I could still hear sirens, so some of the MCSF were in pursuit—I felt a little guilty that some of them were probably down.

“Faster if you can!” I shouted.

“Don't worry—they can't track me.”

“It's not you I'm worried about. I'm losing energon like crazy; it must be leaving a trail.”

“Are you OK?” she asked, registering genuine concern, even in vehicle mode.

The ongoing catalogue of damage indicated I really wasn't, but it was too late now. “I said don't worry about me.”

“OK—hang on!” Blackarachnia had seen an opening in the city wall—a run-off pipe gushing with acid from the storm. It was sealed with a grate, but a plasma grenade from her forward launcher took care of it. We slashed through the water and half-fell, half-jumped into Vos.

The city-state was worse even than the vids had made it look. The idea that the Resistance was being kept well away from Iacon's border was pure propaganda. Every building had bomb or blaster damage. Any repairs were half-finished or already wrecked. Blackarachnia, agile as she was, had to transform to pick her way around the cratered and pocked roadway, littered with rusted piles of scrap. The storm had driven everybody inside—the street was deserted.

Overrun had come down a block away. We jogged towards him, ever mindful of Onyx's aerial approach. The Cyberdroid had transformed by the time we arrived.

“Just let me be!” he wailed.

“Look,” I said harshly, “I'm not letting you get away with murdering Twirl just because you're politically awkward. We're going to figure something out.”

“You've ruined everything!” He poked a slender finger into my chest, causing me to wince with pain. “Why couldn't you leave us alone? They can't be allowed to take me. No-one should have this much power!”

Blackarachnia was pacing the destroyed street, keeping watch. “He's right,” she said simply, “There's nothing left to do.” She had the gun trained on us before I knew what was happening.

“This is a mistake, Blackarachnia,” I warned. “I can't let you have him.”

“You're half-dead, Wolfang—you know I don't want to take you all the way there, but I will if I have to. Give him up.”

I spat mech-fluid and storm-debris from between my teeth. “Cut the true believer act, Blackarachnia—I know even you don't want the Resistance having that kind of power.”

“It doesn't matter what I want! You're such a noble *idiot*, Wolfang!” she shouted, “He's never going to do the right thing. Choose! They'll be here in under five cycles.”

“Correction,” a thin voice chortled, “we're already here.” Tarantulas leapt from atop a leaning, bombed out crane unit. “Onyx will slow down the MCSF while we sort out this little, hehehe, misunderstanding…”

Sure enough, explosions and blaster fire could be heard in the distance, from the direction of Iacon. Tarantulas stalked towards us. “It's been a good chase Wolfang, but I grow weary of it. Give up the Targetmaster. There's a good soldier.”

Suddenly, Blackarachnia dived to the ground, “Wolfang down!” she yelled. I barely had time to comprehend her instructions when the mortar shells screamed from out of the storm and detonated around us.

“I called them in!” Blackarachnia was saying as I recalibrated my audio-sensors. “Fire in the hole!”

“I'll say.” Tarantulas had been knocked flat and dismembered—functional still, but slowed down, hissing angrily as he reattached his severed arm.

“Resistance?” I asked as I levered myself to a sitting position.

“There was no time for that,” she told me with a grim expression, “It was quicker to 'accidentally' make a Resistance broadcast on a frequency the local Micromaster Garrison monitors. This street is about to turn back into a warzone. We've got nowhere to go.”

“Leave me,” Overrun said, flatly. “You're right. I've gone too far, I've done too much. I'm so tired, Wolfang. After all this time, I'm so tired…”

I shook my head. “I can't do that, Overrun. I'll hold them off.”

“Hey!” I shouted at Tarantulas, mobile again, “Let Onyx know I quit!”

He seemed undecided, so I fired a shot at him and sent him scurrying. “You’ll regret this, traitor!” he cackled as he withdrew.

Blackarachnia stood undecided for a nanoklik before holstering her blaster. She approached me with a wry smile and gave me a kiss. “No virus this time,” she said.

“I'm honored,” I joked, with a levity I didn't feel.

“I'll run interference if you guys go the other way. I can call the Resistance off, set them on the Micromasters, on the MCSF if you want. Just say the word.”

I looked at Overrun, and he nodded sadly. “Just get away,” I told her, “I think we're done here.”

“Wolfang,” she said, “You don't have to…”

I looked down at my wrecked torso, the tell-tale bright purple of innermost energon was starting to seep from the wound. “I don't think it's going to matter. Besides, someone needs to make sure there’s nothing left to find.”

I looked up again and she was gone. My comm chimed. *What the Pit?* I answered it.

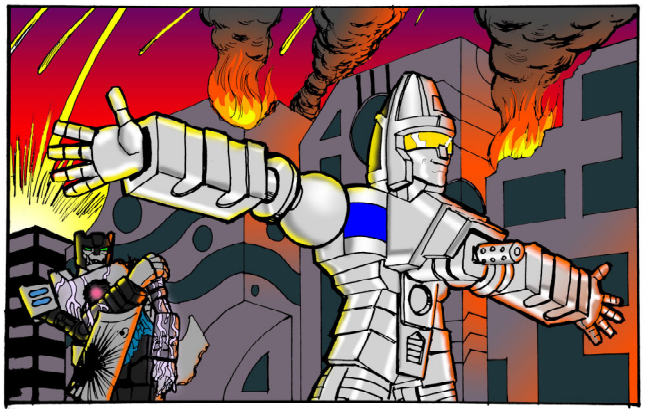
“Wolfang?” Aura shouted in confusion, trying to be heard over the background noise of a battle, “What’s going on. We’re only a hic away from your position, just try to get to us and we’ll get you an extraction.”

“Sorry Aura.” I said, with genuine regret, “Things got a little 'off-codex'.”

“Just come over here,” she was saying, “we can get you patched up.”

I shook my head, “Not this time I'm afraid—I'm not sure I'd know how to write the report.” I blanked slightly as the damage to my torso caused a short, “You should… you should know… this is about to be a hotzone. Pull your bots back Aura, before the fighting arrives. No matter what you may hear after… after, just know that, by the end, I was wrong about a lot of things, but I was MCSF all the way to my spark.”

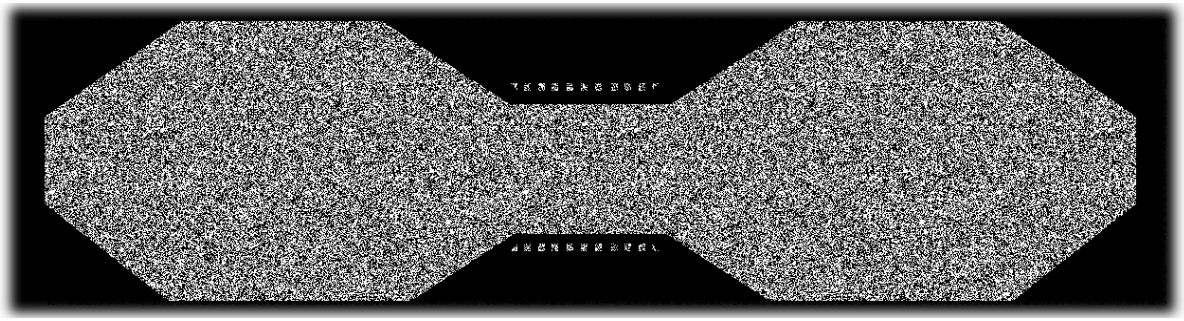
It was too late—the mortar fire resumed, and her signal was lost, and I had no idea how much of my confession she’d heard. Not that it mattered, in the grand scheme. Then a shell blew me off my feet, took off my good leg at the hip.



Overrun looked in my direction. “Are you ready?” he asked, and then walked slowly, calmly, into the middle of the street. The explosions grew nearer and nearer. “I'm coming Apex. I'm coming Hi-Q,” he whispered as he raised his

arms to the storm and waited.

My processor glitched and for a nanoklik I was Twirl, dancing with my arms above my head. When my damaged circuits corrected, I'd missed the shell that claimed him. I registered the smell of his death as I had so many others. The last action of my forensics package before my HUD software snowcrashed was to confirm that there wasn’t enough left of him to build a glitchmouse-trap. Mission accomplished.

I hauled myself painfully upright and sat and smoked, drinking rough engex from my hip-canister and waited for the sun to come up. I don't know exactly when it happened, but my own death smelt of cy-gar-ette smoke and cheap energo-intoxicants.

Figures. There are worse things.