Transformers Timelines Presents:

Force of Habit

A Transformers: Cybertron Story

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Nothing we haven't done before, the thought flowed into Ultra Magnus' head. *Sending mechs out to face who-knows-what.*

Maybe, he thought back, *But the stakes have never been higher.*

Two minds looked out at the main assembly hall of the new Autobot flagship *Iron Hope*, taking in the assembled Autobots through Magnus' optics. His binary-bonded Mini-Con partner Knock Out made note of a couple of them; *Just think. Less than ten stellar cycles ago, some of these guys outranked us.*

Magnus nodded. Scavenger, the Autobot's meanest, nastiest, toughest and, above all, most in-demand trainer leaned against a wall, taking the opportunity to catch a few moment's shutdown. Rodimus, who had really shone in the Powerlinx Battles a decade previous, was talking with Longrack, the newest "captain" in the hastily-assembled exploration fleet.

A soft chime echoed through the room, and conversations died down, every optic turning to Magnus. *Once more into the breach*, Knock Out thought.

"Alright, bots, as you all know, Cybertron is in deep, deep slag. That black hole is growing in power. Long-range satellites report that there are space-time anomalies with that thing's energy signature popping up across nearly all of known space. We've relocated Cybertron's population to Earth, but that's a temporary solution at best. It won't be too long before there's no place left to run, so we gotta close that singularity. Conventional methods have failed… and it looks like we're now after the metaphysical. Optimus Prime has put his faith in this Vector Prime mech, who says the only way to close the singularity is to locate four 'Cyber Planet Keys' and the 'Omega Lock' from colony worlds established and lost by Cybertron millennia ago.

Now, for the good news. Current information points to Earth being a likely candidate for having the Omega Lock, and with most of Cybertron's population there and now actively searching out clues, we should be getting more updates as to its location and that of the other colonies. Also, we have agents on two known colony worlds right now."

Well, one agent trapped alone on one, Knock Out thought bitterly. *We'll get him back,* Magnus thought in reply.

"And now… the not-so-good news. As you know, there are supposed to be four Cyber Planet Keys. However… if the admittedly-fragmented data we've assembled bears out and this Vector Prime's memories hold true, there are *more* than four colony worlds."

The room exploded in stunned exclamations. Magnus raised both hands, calling for silence, and was pleased to note how quickly the room returned to attention even in the face of this revelation.

"There could be upwards a dozen colonies. The four Key-carrying flagships were apparently escorted by several smaller ships, for the purpose of establishing relay points on the Space Bridge Network. The two colonies we've found might not have Keys, and who knows about Earth. While this does complicate our search… there *is* an upside. Even if a colony world doesn't have a Cyber Planet Key, with luck they might be able to fill gaps in our datanet and help us establish the locations of the worlds that *do*… plus, we can always use more allies, like our new Velocitronian friend Blurr here." He nodded to the mech in question, who simply gave a perfunctory nod back, one professional to another. "Once this is all over, we can continue the search to re-establish connection with our lost kin, but the Keys take priority.

"Each team has a starting point, and a list of secondary search points within a few transwarp jumps away. I don't need to stress the point that this information is millennia out of date, so if you find *anything* unusual that might indicate a Cybertron colony world, even if it isn't on the list, *report it immediately and investigate it*!"

Magnus tapped his forearm, revealing a communications panel. Ironhide's face came up on screen. "All ready?"

"All six scout ships are fully-fueled and stocked, sir. Transwarp cells are charged to capacity. Tow-Line is installing the last jump coordinates now."

Magnus nodded and signed off, turning back to the crowd.

"Bulkhead, your team on the *Eclipse* is taking a short jump to the Gamma Kreuger region. It's not far, but there are a *lot* of star systems in the sector to search."

"Sparkplug's team on the *Valiant* will head to the region near Betelgeuse. There are supposedly a series of worlds devastated by natural disaster in the area, so be on your toes. The frequency suggests they might *not* have been natural in origin, possible evidence of Cybertron involvement, particularly Decepticon-style strip-mining.

"Arcee, your group on the *Azusa* are headed to Gamma Serpentis. Long-range scans have picked up definite signs of some form of spacefaring civilization there, so be *diplomatic* no matter what.

"Longrack, you're taking the *Spanner* to Delta Draconis. There's reports of a few space-time anomalies around the area, and not all of them are from that blasted singularity, so be careful.

"Scavenger will take the *DieCast* to Zeta Persei. Not the most hospitable area from what we can tell, but I'm sure you can make yourself right at home there in short order.

"Rodimus' ship, the *Longbow*, will jump to Beta Aquarii, which is kind of the tailpipe-end of the galaxy, but that area seems a likely place for a colony world relay point.

"And finally, the *Iron Hope* itself will head for Delta Crateris, which is also the current rendezvous point for the *Longbow*, *DieCast*, and *Spanner*. The others will return to Cybertron if possible.

"I want to re-emphasize that we are to be *extremely* careful in how we handle ourselves with the population of any civilization we encounter, Cybertron origin or not. We are *not* to engage in any local power struggles or politics, nor are we to whip the populace at large into a panic with…well, with the truth of the situation.

"And one more thing… be on your guard. We have reason to believe the Decepticons managed to hack the archival database, and they likely have a lot of the same information we do. Granted, it isn't much,

and frankly neither are the Decepticon forces, but Megatron's back and nastier than he's ever been, and Primus knows where he might pop up.

"Any questions?... No? Alright then, Autobots… to your ships… let's *roll out!!!*"

"I'm just saying we're getting the raw end of the stick is all. Starscream and Thundercracker get the sweet assignments and we get effectively banished."

Brushguard sighed to himself. Hardtop had been muttering more or less non-stop since the *Upstart* had blasted off from what remained of the Decepticon headquarters on Cybertron, being quiet only when he was reading one of those blasted comic books he always seemed to carry on him. Having recently graduated to loudly complaining, he was quickly getting on Brushguard's last nerve.

"Like you even notice, with your head buried in that organic-scrawled nonsense," he growled, not even looking up from his control panel on the ship's command seat. "The potential for scientific discovery is…"

"Light years away from an oil bath, a decent fueling station or a sequential artist of even remote merit?"

The other Decepticons on the small ship turned to Brushguard. Swindle looked like he was about ready to thump his twin brother Hardtop, but then again, he always looked like he was ready to thump *someone*. Buzzsaw and Runamuck seemed to be taking this all as some form of entertainment… probably hoping someone *would* thump someone else, knowing those two.

Brushguard had his own litany of complaints about this mission, the primary one being saddled with such a motley crew. But Megatron wasn't someone you argued with unless you liked doing so without a head, so he had taken to looking for a bright side to this ugly arrangement.

"While Megatron chases ancient folktales and indecipherable maps, it falls to us to find the remaining Cyber Planet Keys the hard way," he sniffed, tapping randomly at the keys on the console. "Unless you really *want* our homeworld swallowed by that black hole."

"With the Autobots runnin' it like they been for the past vorn*? Slag yeah," Swindle snapped.

"With the Cyber Planet Keys in our possession, Swindle, the balance of power on Cybertron shall certainly see a change for the better," Brushguard replied, with the tone of someone explaining quantum physics to a stunned turbofox. "According to legend, even *one* Cyber Planet Key contains the power to change a world. Which is why, in fact, they have been scattered across the galaxy: to shape new colony worlds for our people."

* 1 vorn = 83 Earth years

Swindle simply snorted, like some filthy animal, which he seemed to do before every sentence. Brushguard himself was having a hard time with the entire premise, having only dabbled in metaphysics, but slagged if he was going to let on to this lot. He could readily accept the explanation for the black hole that now threatened Cybertron; Unicron, a moon-sized machine capable of manipulating the very fabric of space-time itself, was trapped within the heart of a nearby energon sun and destroyed, which had eventually caused the star to collapse into a singularity. As such, Cybertron was now largely abandoned thanks to the gravity well's proximity. Its populace now scuttled about in hiding on Earth among the blissfully unaware humans, while the Autobot military searched for a way of saving the planet, ideally by closing the expanding singularity.

It was the proposed plan to end the threat that Brushguard was having trouble with. Some ancient mechanoid had showed up and claimed that the only hope for the planet –correction, all of existence– was to recover the four Cyber Planet Keys, fragments of the core of the planet Cybertron, which had been lost to the ages. These, coupled with an artifact called the Omega Lock, were supposed to be able to re-awaken the planet itself and seal the singularity.

Brushguard scoffed at such claims, but Megatron had a very direct way of dealing with dissenting opinions. Still, Megatron had given each of the crew their own Cyber Key, supposedly mere fragments of the power each Planet Key held. Each one contained more energy than any energon chip Brushguard had seen. Perhaps Megatron's new powers, stripped from the husk of Unicron itself, had given him insight to just what could and could not stop the singularity.

Or perhaps those powers had driven him insane. It would not have been the first time.

Brushguard had always preferred science to easy answers. Fantasies about mystic relics and tales of ancient gods were shortcuts for the Thundercrackers and Swindles of the universe, those too stupid or lazy to make their own destinies. Yet Brushguard craved power more than knowledge, and so was willing to swallow a little pride in order to investigate legends. Besides, he had pride in surplus. What was magic but technology the foolish and gullible were too incompetent to examine in-depth? He was convinced that if he could simply get his manipulators on one Cyber Planet Key, he could unlock its secrets. It was Brushguard's opinion that there was nothing in the universe that, with the aid of science, could not be dissected, quantified and ultimately replicated.

"Cheer up, Big H," Buzzsaw hummed, his high, vibrating voice cutting through Brushguard's thoughts. He always felt Buzzsaw sounded like someone speaking through a running ventilation fan. "Just imagine all the colony worlds: naive small planetoid femme-bots, unsuspecting targets, unguarded energon reserves… all of it untouched for centuries or more… until we show up." Runamuck chuckled beside him.

"Forget it, Buzz, ever since he rolled off the line *big* brother here only cared about two things: his gun and his comic books." Swindle reached over and snatched the book from Hardtop's hands.

"Give that back, you're creasing the pages! And for the last time, they're *graphic novels*!"

Brushguard cradled his head in his hands. This was going to be a very long mission, he could just tell. Even in a standard-sized cruiser, these simpletons would prove insufferable, but good luck getting one of *those* nowadays. The once-mighty Decepticon spacefleet had been entirely decommissioned after they had lost the last phase of the war. Lost badly. Shortly afterwards, the fleet was disassembled for parts in order to rebuild Cybertron after the devastation that had wracked the planet. Megatron's elite troops now traveled by personal warp-gate, leaving those few grunt-level Decepticons that remained, an insignificant fraction of the once-mighty interstellar empire, to scrounge for transport and supplies.

And on a small dropship-class ship like the *Upstart*, which was just big enough to have a working Transwarp drive and there was no place else to go but the cargo hold… Brushguard growled low to himself. One thing he was sure of, he wasn't going to suffer this indignity for long. Especially if all this Cyber Planet Key malarkey proved true.

A tone from Buzzsaw's station interrupted his thoughts. "Give Big H his book and keep your eyes on the sensors," the yellow and purple Decepticon said, voice thrumming with each word. "We've got the target planet on visual…"

Swindle threw the book over his shoulder, sending Hardtop diving for it. Swindle slid back into his seat. "Class three, faint energy signatures across the board… And what's this?" His face split into a feral grin and he rubbed his hands together.

"There's a ship down there. A ship full of Autobots."

Armorhide scanned the jagged horizon and let out a low whistle. "This place is deader than a Decepticon anger management session…"

"Dead" was certainly the optimal word to describe the planet, Longrack had to admit. The atmosphere was streaked with smoke and tinted a horrible shade of red, painting everything in harsh shades of orange-crimson and pitch-black shadow. As near as they could tell, they had landed in mid-day. Brief gusts of howling wind threw dirt and debris in seemingly random directions, which also provided the only sounds on the planet. The effect was like listening to some ancient torture chamber from a long distance, the wail of the dying combined with the clank of dead metal… of which there was plenty.

Every step they took was punctuated by the crunch of rusted steel, the scrape of random metal filings. The remnants of buildings littered the landscape. Nothing stood intact anymore.

"Ten thousand miles of bad road if you ask me," Blurr muttered as he stepped gingerly off the *Spanner*'s ramp. He had only just joined the Autobots, having been created on the recently-rediscovered Cybertronian colony world of Velocitron. His home-world was a planet where racing formed the focus of the culture and Blurr was renowned as a first-rate instructor planet-wide. "I have a bad feeling about this. You know we haven't been able to get any kind of life readings, or much of any readings at *all*, for that matter."

"I don't care how it looks," Longrack replied grimly. "If there's a Cyber Planet Key on this planet, inhabited or no, Optimus Prime is counting on us to bring it back."

Armorhide turned back to Longrack, lightly bouncing his boom-cannon on his shoulder. "Why would a Cyber Planet Key be layin' in the middle of a junkyard like this, ya reckon?"

"It may not have always been a dump." The Autobots turned towards Checkpoint, a wide-shouldered white Autobot who had wandered over to a burnt-out bunker and was kneeling down inspecting a pile of metal. "Check it," he said, pulling a shattered arm free. "This isn't a junkyard… it's a graveyard."

The wind picked that time to blow and each Autobot could now see just what the piles of scrap consisted of… bodies. The shadows had hidden them, but now the contours of limbs and faces seemed to melt out of the darkness. Countless shattered, rusting robot bodies of just about any conceivable form. Some had been torn limb from limb, some had been holed by artillery, but all very, very dead. A collective shudder ran through the group.

"Maybe they were fighting over the Key?" Checkpoint offered.

Armorhide leaned close to a large, hulking torso with a sizable hole in its chest. He wiped away some of the ash that coated it, revealing a faded red sigil that he didn't recognize, but certainly had familiar elements. He looked at the Autobot sigil emblazoned on his cannon and back to the corpse's brand. "Well, lookee here, they gots Autobots… or somethin' like it, at least."

Longrack used his massive shovel-arm to gingerly roll over another half a corpse and peered at the sigil on its shoulder, all spikes and angles. "If I had to guess, I'd say we had Decepticons to match… big surprise."

A series of clangs behind them echoed through the dusky graveyard. They turned to see Blurr dropping several pieces of robot into a pile. "If that's the case, then who are these guys?"

The other three gathered around the pile. Each piece bore a different sigil. They were undeniably all based off of the same two original sigils, but ranged as wildly in coloration and detail as the forms of the bodies themselves varied.

"Something doesn't jive here... I count no less than seven faction marks. And from the look of things it was a free-for-all." Checkpoint looked around the landscape. "We sure we're on the right planet? Vector Prime said

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SWAT

the Keys were taken to colonies long before the civil war even…"

He spun, mortar-cannon raised. The others turned quickly, but saw nothing but miles of motionless metal.

"Sorry. Thought I saw something."

"My fuel regulator's already overclocked, Checkpoint," Armorhide grumbled. "Really 'preciate it if you didn't do that again. 'Sides, looks like there's nobody home anymore."

"We need to stay cautious until we're sure of that," Longrack said. "Checkpoint, search the wreckage in the immediate area, see if you can find a Cyber Key on any of these bodies. If we can find one that still has some charge, we can maybe get an energy signature off it that might lead us to the Planet Key, assuming there is one here."

"Right on, boss man."

"Blurr, I want a sweep of the immediate perimeter."

"I'm on it."

"Armorhide, try to see if there's any radio traffic. If we're not alone I need to know about it."

Armorhide shot him a grin. "Ah c'mon chief, can't I trade with Blurr? If this planet's got Decepticons, I want first crack at 'em. I've got a joke with an explosive punch line I've been wantin' to try out on a live audience."

"Absolutely not! Even if there are native Decepticons, that's not our job! If we make contact at all it has to be peaceful and diplomatic, clear?"

The smaller robot gave a small sigh, but kept smiling. "Like the space between Thundercracker's audio receptors, boss." He shrugged and folded in on himself, body reconfiguring until he settled into his tractor-trailer truck alternate mode. A panel on his air-dam slid open and a radio dish rose up.

"There's probably no one left on this 'apocalypse planet' ta' run into anyhow," he quipped as he slowly drove away from the *Spanner*.

A short distance away, a pile of metal, silhouetted against the sky, shuffled and became just a little smaller.

"I don't get it," Runamuck muttered over inter-Decepticon radio, his voice slightly static-distorted even though he was barely a hundred yards behind Brushguard and Swindle. His low-riding streetcar vehicle mode was having trouble negotiating the uneven terrain, which posed little problem for his teammates' off-road forms. "You'd expect in a place this war-ravaged, you'd find *something* that was being fought over."

"What the smelt are you talking about?" Swindle snorted. "War is its own slaggin' reward."

"Correction," Brushguard sighed, reflecting that it was a sad statement when Runamuck was the more thoughtful of any pairing. "The *leftovers* of war are its reward. So much salvage… so many unguarded tombs to loot."

His oversized tires crushed an ancient, half-melted metal skull as he drove aimlessly through the ruins.

"It's all so beautiful."

"It gives *me* the surges," Runamuck grumbled.

"Hold a minute…" Brushguard hit the brakes and leapt into the air, shifting to robot mode. He landed, with surprising grace, on one knee. Swindle pulled up behind him, transforming and watching as Brushguard carefully examined something at the base of another body pile.

"Now, this is interesting…"

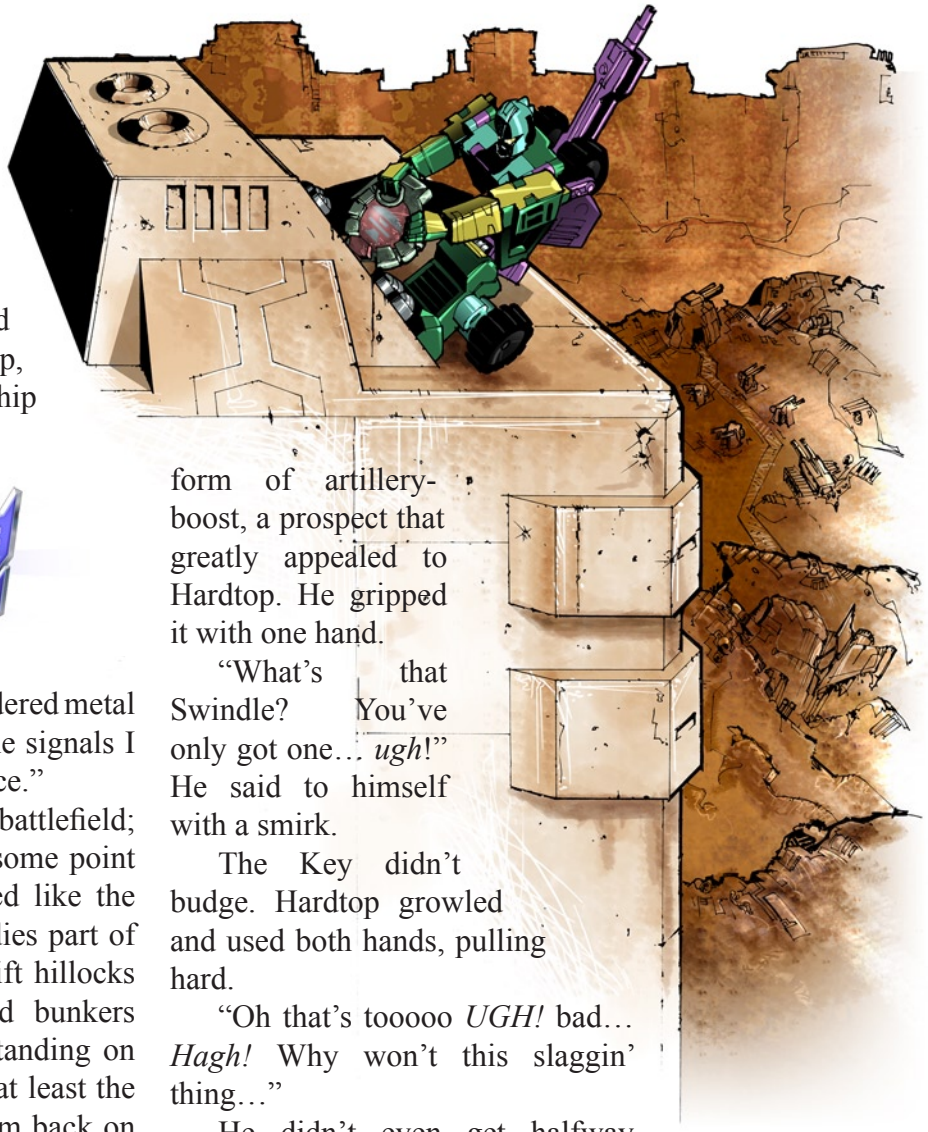
Peeking over his shoulder, Swindle saw Brushguard carefully move a small, organic shrub with his wrist-mounted claw. It was rust-red like everything else, looking withered and weak and Brushguard was treating it like it would explode if jostled too much.

"A shrub. *Fascinating*."

"Silence, you mono-tasking simpleton," Brushguard spat without looking back. "Plant life doesn't last long in an all out-war like this planet has seen and the background radiation and toxic cloud cover that lingers can eliminate growth for hundreds of megacycles… No… the fighting would have to have stopped for this little sprout to get its roots…"

A small needle extended from the end of one claw, piercing the plant's main stem and drawing a sample

from it. Swindle amused himself by eyeing various rusted body parts he could maybe use to cudgel Brushguard with as the Decepticon analyzed the plant's genetic material. "This war ended at *least* three hundred and fifty megacycles ago," Brushguard announced, picking himself up. As Runamuck drove up, Brushguard flipped open his communicator on his arm. "Hardtop, Buzzsaw, have you located the Autobot ship yet?"



"No luck, the wind kicks up enough powdered metal to act like chaff. Sensors are limited and the signals I *am* picking up are bouncing all over the place."

Hardtop looked out across another battlefield; slag, the entire *planet* was a battlefield at some point or another, near as he could tell. It looked like the inhabitants had simply made the fallen bodies part of the scenery, even piling them into makeshift hillocks for cover between the hastily-constructed bunkers and barricades. The "cliff" Hardtop was standing on was even the shoulder of a colossal robot, at least the size of those blasted Omega Guardians from back on Cybertron.

He turned slowly to climb back down when something caught his eye. It stuck out of the ground, flat but roughly fist-sized. It was covered in grime and soot. While it was not a design he'd seen before, it certainly had the look of a Cyber Key.

"I'll let you know when I find something," he grinned. "Hardtop out…"

He casually strolled to his target, kicking random bits of metal as he did.

"Yeah, I'll let you know, when I'm rubbing it in your faces."

He bent over the Key…yes, definitely a Cyber Key. *Excellent*. It was faded, but he knew enough about the Keys to know once it was in his hands, it would begin to recharge itself automatically. In an environment like this, it would likely provide some form of artillery-boost, a prospect that greatly appealed to Hardtop. He gripped it with one hand.

"What's that Swindle? You've only got one… *ugh*!" He said to himself with a smirk.

The Key didn't budge. Hardtop growled and used both hands, pulling hard.

"Oh that's tooooo *UGH!* bad… *Hagh!* Why won't this slaggin' thing…"

He didn't even get halfway through the "bu" in "budge" before the Key popped free, unbalancing him. He had a second to reflect that the edge of the cliff was only a few steps behind him, but his feet didn't get the message and they scrambled backwards. He whimpered as one foot hit open air and then uttered a horrible word as he toppled over the edge.

His fall was broken by him breaking through several rusted outcroppings on the way down. He ended up face-down in the dirt, or at lest something dirt-like. He lay still for several seconds while the pain died down and internal diagnostics worked out that he at least had not suffered permanent damage.

He allowed himself a small smile. He still had that Cyber Key.

His smile faded as soon as he lifted his head to examine his prize. The key-tooth had shattered. He watched in horror as hairline cracks fanned out along the dimmed crystal. The Key disintegrated in his hand, leaving only the rapidly-rusting metal frame and a pile of fine dust that scattered in the wind.

Hardtop let his head hit the ground again. "*Great*," he mumbled. "All that for a worthless piece of junk… at least things can't get any worse."

The low rumble told him he should never have opened his mouth. He realized quickly that this sort of thing always happened in the books he read, and he really should have known better. He knew to his spark he had about two seconds before something terrible happened. He also knew that wasn't enough time to do anything to prevent it.

"I *hate* this planet."

With that, the ground beneath him gave way and Hardtop tumbled into darkness.

Not too far away, something rustled behind a pile of bodies and slipped into shadow.

Slowly, Hardtop came back online. A very faint light from the hole way too high above didn't so much as illuminate the darkness as give the cavern a dim red cast, letting him do little more than make out rough shapes. He picked himself unsteadily, shook his head and activated the lamp imbedded in his forehead to examine his surroundings.

Then he uttered another horrible word.

"Brushguard, lock in on my location and get over here!"

Brushguard cursed under his breath. He had just started analysis on another plant; this one looked like it actually fed off rust, which could be useful indeed.

"You found the Cyber Planet Key?"

"Can't say for *sure*…"

"Hardtop, if this is another one of your inane quarter-bin finds…"

"Trust me… this is *big*.

"Blurr to Longrack, you hear me, chief?"

Blurr's wheels left a dim light blue trail as he sped onwards, the radio-psychasthenic circuits in the hubs generating a low-level radiation field that broke down the smaller debris in his path, smoothing out his ride on the uneven terrain, while simultaneously exerting a gravity field, keeping him firmly on the ground and letting his rear thrusters on low-burn coast him along with minimal effort.

"*Zzzrk* hear you *zzzzkkkk*ference. Have you *zzzk* anything?"

"Nothing yet, just ash, metal and more ash. I think this end may be as dead as this planet."

A good racer can react to a disturbance in a split second. A *great* racer can react *before* the disturbance. Blurr swerved suddenly and the patch of ground he would have been over otherwise erupted.

"Scratch that! I'm taking fire!"

"*Kssssh*peat that, Blurr, who's fir*zzzzzzsk*…"

Blurr anticipated another blast, fishtailing wildly as he made his way erratically towards another round of shelled-out bunkers for cover. He could finally see his attacker: a large helicopter thrummed in the distance, twin cannons thundering as it tried to track him, silhouetted against the red-streaked sky.

"Unknown! Can't get a good look, but it's some kind of chopper and it's shooting mad!"

"*kssss*ruption… some*sszzz*jammi*kzzzzz*…."

"Hello? Blurr to base, this is bad news! Longrack, Armorhide, Checkpoint… *anybody!?*"

He skidded behind a particularly large bunker, giving him a few seconds to think as blaster-fire ricocheted off the pitted metal. This wasn't the kind of first contact he liked to make. He needed answers as to what happened on this world and it looked like his attacker was his only option. Which meant he had to stick around and take him down, alive and, for preference, unharmed.

Nothing like a challenge to brighten a Velocitron's day.

He bolted from the cover a split second before a missile took out most of the corner, leaping and trans-

forming to robot mode in midair, diving behind a hillock.

"Okay, you flying blender… I may not be the fastest 'bot on wheels…"

He grinned wickedly as he tapped into his extra-dimensional storage pocket, summoning his Cyber Key. He glowed red briefly as the Key plugged into his backpack, flipping the sides down, revealing thrusters.

"… but I *am* the fastest on my feet! *Hope you like surprises!"*

He broke out of the cover, feet pounding into the dirt. The thrusters on his back flared and Blurr charged the helicopter, becoming a blue streak of light and easily sidestepping each shot, a small sonic boom thudding in his wake, throwing debris around.

"*Class is in session!*" he shouted. As always, the Key sped up his voice almost to the point of being unintelligible.

It had come as a surprise to Blurr to find out that the inhabitants of Cybertron had only recently heard of Cyber Keys. They'd been a part of Velocitron society since who-knows-when, artifacts passed down among the centuries, with a rare few who were able to craft new ones using exceptionally rare crystals found deep under the surface of the planet.

+External energy source at ninety-two percent + Current land speed at point-three kilometers per second and rising+ his internal computer chimed at him.

Of course, Keys from his planet were tweaked for speed. Where he came from, nitro-injection systems were considered a second-gear gimmick. Blurr had adapted his systems to channel the Key's energy to enhance his reaction time just as much as his land-speed. Most on Velocitron thought that vehicle mode was the optimal racing form, but Blurr had been through too many obstacle courses and multi-car pile-ups to neglect the split-second maneuverability a good set of legs and arms could offer over wheels.

Versatility was the key. He had to think outside the gearbox.

He cleared the plain easily, running directly under the copter and speeding off in the opposite direction. He *could* have hit it with missiles as he ran under, but he had to be *diplomatic* in taking this machine down. He rounded a body-pile and came back at the chopper, which was still spinning in a vain attempt to track him.

He went wide and started to circle, his orbit getting shorter and shorter, the chopper twisting to try and aim at something barely visible at that speed.

+External energy source at seventy-eight percent + Current land speed at point-nine kilometers per second and rising+

Blurr ran in a tight circle, the wind picking up, dirt swirling, a funnel forming in the middle, tossing the chopper back and forth.

"S*ay'uncle'and I might let you down! Other wise enjoy the ride!*" Blurr called out. The chopper replied by firing wildly, the shots spraying randomly into the distance as it was lightly battered by flying debris, trapped in the funnel of wind.

+External energy source at sixty-five percent + Current land speed steady at one-point-seven kilometers per second+

Two small figures watched the scene from a hill. One beeped at the other, a series of high-pitched electronic blips. The other nodded and got down on its front, raising two spidery clawed arms skyward. The other machine looped a large rubber belt across its companion's arms, forming a crude slingshot.

Satisfied, it grabbed a rusted engine block and slipped it in front of the band, pulling back.

[O1OO1*I*1O11O1O1O*hope*O*you*O*like*O*surprises*O11O11O1O1OOO1O] the one forming the slingshot chittered as its partner let go of the engine.

The chunk of metal slammed into the lower half of the blue wall of light that was Blurr in motion, exploding into shrapnel as it connected, but it had the intended effect. Tripped up, Blurr's momentum rocketed him forward though the air.

"*OHSMEEEEEEEEEELLLLLLLLLLLLLLT!!!*"

Piles of bodies exploded as Blurr plowed through them uncontrollably. It took a couple miles for him to stop, cutting a deep groove through rusted debris. He finally lay still, too weak to even groan. Systems crashed across the board. Pain blossomed from every joint.

+External energy source at three percent and dropping + Critical systems crash immanent, engaging stasis lock+

Three machines stood over him, little more than black shapes with glowing optics as he lost consciousness.

[OO1O1111O1O1O1O*not*O*the*O*fastest*O1*bot*11O1O1O1O1O1]

"Blurr! COME IN, BLURR!"

Longrack groaned as his communicator answered with static. He switched to the broadcast channel.

"Checkpoint, Armorhide, come in. Blurr ran into some serious trouble and it looks like the new order of the day is search and rescue. I'm broadcasting his last known coordinates, we'll meet up there and start the search."

He trundled up the ship's ramp. There was one thing he had to do first. He sat in the main chair and tapped a code into the communications panel.

"This is the *Spanner*, calling the *Iron Hope*."

Prowl looked up from his station. "Message coming in from the *Spanner*, sir."

Ultra Magnus strode to the captain's chair. The *Iron Hope* was the Autobots' newest flagship… and only really half-finished. It had been in the works for a long time after the last war, built for deep-space long-term exploration… but the threat of the black hole had pressed it into service well before it could be fully completed. It was functional, had a working Transwarp drive… but only about a third of its armaments were there, a lot of the crews' quarters were incomplete and the bays for smaller explorer ships had only gotten about three-fourths done.

Magnus would have loved to have gone out as the ship's first captain with an actually-complete ship, but what was there to do? Optimus Prime trusted this old mechanoid, Vector Prime, who had told them about the Cyber Planet Keys... but Optimus wasn't about to let trust blind him to the need for a little insurance. The *Iron Hope* was loaded up, crewed as best they could, and sent off with as much data as Vector Prime could recall about the various colony worlds to find anything they could.

"This is the *Iron Hope*. Is the news good, Longrack?"

"Negative, Ultra Magnus. This colony is a complete wasteland and if there's a Cyber Planet Key here, there's no sign of it. To top it off, it looks like Blurr may have run afoul of the locals. If the *DieCast* or the *Longbow* haven't launched yet, we could use the help."

"I'm afraid you missed the launch of both ships by a couple of cycles. All the exploratory vessels are on their way to the other search points.... you're on your own. Get your man back and get back on the mission"

"Understood, sir. Longrack out."

As the screen blinked out, Ironhide turned in his seat. "Ultra Magnus, sir, we can't just leave them!"

Magnus sighed. "I have nothing but confidence in Longrack and his crew, Ironhide. Even if I didn't, however, we have our orders. If we fail, everyone, *everywhere*, dies."

He knew heads had turned to watch him. He fixed his gaze on the blackness of space ahead of him through the main viewport.

"This is bigger than all of us. Time is not on our side." He allowed himself a little smile. "Just like always. Let's get to it."

A chuckle rippled through the bridge. Ironhide snapped off a salute, barked out an enthusiastic "*Yes, sir!*" and turned back to his station. All around, the Autobots went back to their tasks with a greater sense of urgency.

The captain's chair creaked as Magnus' bulk settled into it. He knew that the moment would pass soon and the bleakness of their situation would creep over them again, but he'd savor the surge of confidence his crew had while he could.

He thought he'd seen the worst that could be thrown at his people, having survived the Armada War and the Powerlinx Battles and only barely. But now… the black hole. The reports coming back from the observation posts kept bringing in grimmer and grimmer news, tales of the singularity not just threatening Cybertron, but distorting the very fabric of space and time, wearing holes in reality. Stray tendrils would whip through space and time would warp in bizarre fashion.

In theory, the black hole would soon manifest itself throughout the galaxy and beyond, devouring everything. Some scientists even worried that it would not limit itself to this universe, but could even begin to devour the theoretical alternate universes as well.

Everything, everywhere, every time, consumed, by a foe you couldn't out-muscle.

And the only way to prevent it is to find some mystic relics from a forgotten age, supposedly scattered across the cosmos.

Terrific.

"Let's just hope they don't run into anything worse out there," he whispered to himself.

"That's a big door."

Slag-kicker, Brushguard thought bitterly to himself, casting a glare at Buzzsaw. Any idiot could see it was a big door. Heavy steel, scored by blast-marks, towered over them, easily three times their height.

It'd have to be a big door to accommodate some of the robots whose chassis lay around them in the now flare-lit cavern they'd traveled through to reach Hardtop's position. Just like on the surface, here bodies and parts were strewn about messily. One particularly-large probable-Autobot sat with its back against half the door… well, half of its back. The other half was on the floor, the robot bisected down the middle through its head and torso.

The fighting here looked especially ferocious. Whatever was behind that door, *someone* wanted it kept there and out of the others' hands and had managed to succeed. Of course, now it was only the Decepticons here…

"Do we just go up and knock?"

"Runamuck, you're out of your element," Brushguard snapped. He waved a hand. "Swindle, open the door… your way."

He snorted in response. "Yeah, sure thing, no problem… *Knock knock*!!" He raised his cannon and let loose with a blast of firepower.

"*Hardtop, Buzzsaw, autoguns! NOW!!*"

Swindle looked up at Brushguard's yell, just in time to see two cannons, which had flipped out from the walls on either side of the door. The left one exploded with a simple, single clean shot from Hardtop's rifle, while the

right was nearly atomized between Buzzsaw's Gatling-cannon slugs and ribbon-beam, both of which persisted for a couple seconds too long.

Brushguard smiled to himself as the noise faded… and hit the ground hard when Swindle slugged him in the jaw.

"*You knew it was booby-trapped!!*"

Hardtop grabbed his brother, managing to get the snarling, kicking mechanoid into a half-nelson.

"Let me *go*! I'll recycle him with my bare hands!"

Brushguard picked himself up, rubbing his jaw. When he turned back to Swindle, he merely grinned smugly.

"You were the only scientific option, Swindle. I knew Buzzsaw and Hardtop could hit the guns, or what have you… Only Runamuck has the raw strength to open the door and… well, I'm the processor of this outfit. The process of elimination put the job on you. Elementary."

Swindle has stopped struggling and went to steaming. Hardtop slowly let him go and the Decepticon simply stood, clenching and unclenching his fists.

"I won't forget this."

"I don't expect you to. Now, Runamuck… you may knock."

Runamuck walked up to the door and leaned in, examining it in a manner that he probably thought looked intelligent. He nodded, then walked away into the darkness.

The cavern lit with a blue glow as Runamuck summoned his Cyber Key from its extra-dimensional storage pocket, which plugged into the engine block on his chest. The blue dissipated and was replaced by deep red light, as Runamuck's eyes glowed… followed by his fists. Flames licked along his fingers, until his hands were enveloped in bright flame.

He howled and ran forward, both arms drawn back, rushing the door. Both arms swung forward trailing fire, his arm-guards slamming forward like pistons, crashing into the door on its seam. Without hesitating, he battered that spot repeatedly, fists hammering back-and-forth for several minutes.

Runamuck stopped and the din cleared, eyeing the small hole he'd made in the doors. He forced his thick fingers into the crack and started to push outwards. The stale air filled with the tortured cream of ancient metal giving way, protesting as the door was pried slowly open. Another minute and the massive doors had parted enough to let the Decepticons slide through sideways.

Behind them was pitch blackness.

Runamuck turned and the other four were simply staring at him expectantly. Hardtop tossed him a flare. Runamuck fumbled it a little, looked from his teammates back to the darkness and uttered something under his breath.

The flare blazed to life and Runamuck slowly crept in, while the other four took a few surreptitious steps towards cover. Runamuck's silhouette was just barely visible within the darkness behind the door…

"By the *Pit*…"

Clanks echoed through the air as lights burst to life on the other side.

"I found a relatively undamaged data-con right before I got your signal," Checkpoint said. "I think you'll want to know what's on it."

"Can't it wait until we've found Blurr?"

"I don't think it should."

"Let's hear it…"

"We're on a world called Combatron… like the other colonies, it was originally intended to be part of the galactic Space Bridge Network. Specifically, this world was supposed to be a garrison."

"What for?"

"Standing orders were to be prepared for a showdown with 'the enemy'… three guesses who *that* was."

"The ol' planet-popper, huh?" Armorhide quipped.

"Natch. The original inhabitants were among the best of the best of Cybertron's warriors and commanders, all led by someone called 'King Atlas.'"

"King?"

"Don't ask me, I don't name 'em."

"So if this place was supposed ta be the home of the best military force ever… *what the slag happened*?"

"King Atlas disappeared."

"He was killed?"

"I don't know… in fact, I don't think *anybody* knows what really happened to him."

"'Cept for King Atlas."

"Uh… yeah. Any rate, the records are vague at best. One day he was just… gone. No body, no nothing. Left a power vacuum and between the ambitious and the suspicious, the army fragmented. Bigtime. Things just fell apart. Without Cybertron's influence and a strong leader, 'the enemy' became 'everyone else.'"

"Yow."

"A civil war broke out and just never really stopped. No one was willing to be flexible or compromise and 'with us or against us' became the order of the day. And we're looking at the results."

"And after a while," Longrack said quietly, "… they just kept fighting because that's what they've always done and always known."

"Sad part is, Cybertron was supposed to send a commander to relieve King Atlas centuries ago… apparently, as with all the other colonies, we just… forgot."

"Slagging shame," Armorhide sighed. "Don't suppose that data-con says anything about the actual locations of the Cyber-Planet-Key-havin' planets?"

"What? And make our lives easier?"

"Figures."

"The data that's on here is already pretty fragmented; if it *was* on here to begin with, it's long gone."

"So if there's no Cyber Planet Key here, what were they fighting over?"

"They brought *weapons*, Longrack. I'm talking legendary stuff. Probably just as dangerous as a Cyber Planet Key in the wrong hands."

"Oh, goodie," Armorhide muttered.

"I'm in *love*."

The five Decepticons stared. It was a warehouse, filled with crates and weapons racks of countless variety. More ways of doling out death than they could have ever dreamed of lay before them, untouched for centuries, the other end of the cavernous storeroom lost in the distance.

"This is better than a Cyber Planet Key!" Hardtop exclaimed, making his way to a shelf of steel crates, reading the markers. "Look at this stuff! Cyclon blasters, probability grenades, positron disruptors…"

"Real wrath-of-god type stuff," Brushguard breathed, the wheels in his head turning overtime.

"If we bring this stuff to Megatron-"

"*Forget* Megatron. We can keep the best, give him a pittance and sell the rest… we could live like *kings*."

Buzzsaw looked up from a pile of graviton bazookas. "That's dangerous talk…"

"Is it?" Swindle barked. "You want to spend your life under his thumb? Have you seen Snow Cat or Demolishor lately?" He spat a bit of waste oil which spattered against a box of neutronium charges. "Loyalty makes for a short tour of duty around here. The geek may have a point."

"Check it out! They have Mini-Cons here!" Runamuck called out from another corner, before Brushguard could comment on the "geek" crack.

"We *know* that. We've seen the bodies."

"I mean they have Mini-Cons *right here*," he said, holding two small, glowing-green pentagonal panels, one in each hand. "Storage panels! Powerlinx power-boost, here I come!"

"Bah, keep 'em. I don't need a sidekick," Hardtop grumbled, starting to assemble a large rifle. "I'll stick with my Cyber Key."

"Same here, I don't trust the little scraplets since they started fighting back," Swindle growled.

Runamuck shrugged and handed one panel over to Buzzsaw.

"Now I, on the other hand, found these nucleon shock gauntlets!" Swindle smiled, pulling a pair of oblongs out of a storage container. They looked somewhat like brass knuckles, but had a variety of wicked-looking protrusions sticking out of them. "They're outlawed by every weapons treaty in the civilized universe! DIBS!" He slipped one gauntlet over the back of his hand and it snapped into place, magno-clamps securing it and the prongs flared to life, snakes of energy crackling along them. He gave an evil little grin and sidled over to his brother.

"Oh Haaaardtop…"

Hardtop didn't even look up. "What?"

It was barely even a tap, a playful blow to the shoulder that wouldn't even scuff the armor. But the energy from the gauntlets sent Hardtop flying. He smashed into a piece of machinery in a shadowy corner and lay crumpled on a pallet.

"Oh, *smelt*, Hardto- I didn't…" Swindle said as he turned away. An unfamiliar feeling swept through his circuits. A more rounded mechanoid would have immediately recognized the sensation as regret. "It was a joke…"

The machine sprung to life. Electrodes above Hardtop lit up and sent two bolts into him. His body jerked as the beams wrapped around him, lighting the chamber further. In the distance, *something* started running, the sound of heavy machinery thundering to functionality.

Suddenly, the beams disappeared, but the machinery kept going. Panels and viewscreens lit up and the hidden machines continued to clank.

Brushguard carefully approached the prone Hardtop, as the others raised their weapons, swinging them at the shadows.

"What did you do, Swindle?! *What did you do?"*

"Well, *someone* survived all this, or else we'd know where Blurr *was* right now."

Longrack looked around him. It was hard to tell where the old damage ended and the new damage began, but there were certainly signs of a recent battle here and Blurr's tire-tracks, ending quite suddenly.

Something rattled in a nearby pile. They spun, weapons raised…

[O1O1O1O1OOOO11O111O*something*O *survived*OO1O111O1O1O]

A small burgundy machine dropped onto the back of Checkpoint's head, clamped on tight.

Armorhide ran for him. "Mini-Con! What's it- *huuuugh!*" Something slammed into his midsection from the direction of the rattle, a larger Mini-Con in vehicle mode, front-mounted grippers clamped firmly around his waist and squeezing. It howled *something* in a low, warbling binary-speak.

Checkpoint tried to pry the Mini-Con off his head, swearing up and down. Its long, three-fingered hands wrapped around his head, trying to maintain leverage.

[O1O11O111OOO1O1*make*OourO*li-ves*O*easier*11O111O1O1OO1O] it hissed at him, Cybertronic Standard words weaved into its binary chirping.

"*Surrender or be deactivated!!!*"

Longrack turned. Another robot was bearing down on him, but it was no Mini-Con. Silhouetted against the horizon, it held a long blade in a two-handed grip, a large multi-barreled cannon attached to its left arm, its visor flashing bright.

In the dim light, he could just make out the sigil painted on its shoulders. The central feature was a sword, but the outer parts were unmistakable, as was the red.

Longrack pulled himself up to his full height and even hunched over in a dead run, the figure was clearly larger than him. Longrack steadied himself and stared, unflinching, at the approaching warrior. It was a gamble…

"*In the name of the Cybertron army, STAND DOWN!!!*"

The effect was everything he could have hoped for. The robot stumbled in surprise, nearly falling face-first several times as it tried to stop. He didn't dare turn away from his addled attacker because it still had a firm grip on the sword, but he could hear that the two Mini-Cons had stopped struggling behind him.

The robot managed to skid to a halt before bumping into Longrack. His optics shifted to the bright red Autobot sigil on Longrack's shovel-arm. "Cy-Cybertron?"

"I said *STAND DOWN, SOLDIER!! ATTEN-SHUN!!!!*"

The robot snapped to attention. The sword was stuck tip-first into the dirt and his right arm shot up to his forehead in a textbook salute. Longrack didn't let his surprise show when the cannon on his other arm popped off and shifted in mid-air, another Mini-Con, landing beside its partner and giving a somewhat less enthusiastic salute.

Longrack remembered some of the drill sergeants he'd overheard from a few mega-miles away while working on various military installations back on Cybertron. Scavenger's voice in particular came readily to mind. "This is about the *sorriest* welcome I have ever *seen*, soldier! You have *assaulted* a senior officer, you have *kidnapped* a fellow soldier and you call that armor *clean*?!" He realized he might be pressing his luck at that point, but he strode forward and got as in the other robot's face as possible considering their size differ-

ences. "You are *one step away* from a *court-martial*, soldier!!"

Panic spread across the robot's face. He tried to stand even more at attention than he already was, probably risking breaking a support strut somewhere. "Apologies *sir*! I believed you were with the enemy unit in sector 25-R, *sir!!*"

Checkpoint and Armorhide just stood and watched the scene. The two Mini-Cons had stopped and were saluting them, albeit without the enthusiasm of their larger compatriot… the blue clamp-topped one was giving them a weary, suspicious eye, while the burgundy spider-fingered one seemed incapable of staying still. It looked up at them and bleeped [OO1O1OO1*apologies*OOO1O1O]

"What's he *doing*?"

"If I had ta guess, Checkpoint, I'd say he's being peaceful and diplomatic."

Blurr muttered random obscenities as Armorhide cut through the cables binding him to a steel pole. Checkpoint and Longrack looked around at the hollowed-out bunker. The quartet of Combatrons had clearly been here a long time, but by the looks of it had endeavored to try and keep it as tidy as a base composed at least three-fourths of fallen, rusted robot bodies could be kept. Gun turrets lined the walls, all crudely hooked up to a few smallish, jury-rigged generators, some of which had clearly been pulled out of the larger fallen. A well-trodden path around the edge showed exactly the route they patrolled every day.

"Good job," Longrack said, genuinely impressed. "Excellent use of what materials are at hand… umm…"

"Private Whirl of the Combatron Atlas Army, Forty-Sixth Armored Flying Division, Tenth South-Wing Platoon, Hailfire Squad Number Eight-Three-Nine, The Fighting Eight-Three-Nines, *sir*! This is my Mini-Con partner-unit Thunderstick, *sir!*" he said, as the small tan Mini-Con gave another weary salute. "And this is Fifth Heavy Assault Mini-Con Division, Alpha-Delta East Platoon, Irontread Squad Number One-One-Three-Eight Commander Grip-Lock," –the blue Mini-Con warbled something as he helped get the last of the bonds off Blurr– "And Skysickle, original assignment unit unknown, *sir*!"

[O1O1O1O1OO*at*O*hand*OO1O11O11O1O1]

"Uh… yes. At ease, Whirl."

"Yes, sir. I apologize for attacking you, Commander Longrack. I did not realize that the enemy had come and that you had come here to lead the fight against them, sir."

"When did Longrack get a field promotion?" Blurr mumbled, stretching his joints out.

"It's a strange story," Armorhide replied.

"You mentioned enemy troops, soldier…"

Whirl paused. "I… don't remember, sir. It's been so long since I've seen anyone alive, or had anyone to talk to but the Mini-Cons here."

"*How* long?" Checkpoint asked.

Whirl worked out something in his head, his expression flickering slightly. "Approximately fifty-three vorns, sir."

"Whoah. Four hundred stellar cycles?"

"I think so, yes, sir."

"So… about these enemy troops?"

"Well, sir, it was Grip-Lock who saw them."

Grip-Lock ambled over, dusting his claws off, his dataspeak voice low and slightly staticky.

"He says he saw four ground vehicles and a helicopter in Sector 25-R, grid 6-2-4, sir. The leader is a light-blue ground unit, with claws."

"*Brushguard*!" Armorhide snarled. "He and his Decepticreep buddies followed us here!"

"Either that or they had the same information on the colonies as we did," Blurr muttered. "We're lucky we weren't ambushed twice today."

A wail split the air, sputtering slightly. Whirl turned to the pole Blurr had been tied to, the bullhorn on its top crying into the sky. "Oh, no… the vault!"

"Whirl… this would be the vault with the doomsday arsenal?"

"Uh, yes, sir."

"Oh, *smelt*," Checkpoint groaned.

"Doomsday arsenal?"

"I'll fill you in on the way back to the *Spanner*, Blurr," Longrack snapped. "On your feet, troops! Private, I want to know *exactly* what's in this vault the

Decepticons have cracked open and I want to know yesterday!"

"Yes, sir! I'll see if I can locate a manifest file!"

Blurr leaned over to Armorhide.

"He's really getting into this, isn't he?"

"According to the private here, the Decepticons have discovered some kind of ammo dump. All evidence would indicate that this arsenal was originally stockpiled for a doomsday standoff. With that kind of firepower…"

Magnus groaned. "I appreciate the extreme delicacy of your situation. Unfortunately…"

The bridge of the *Iron Hope* shook and yet another alarm screamed to life.

"…I can't deal with that right now! Starboard plasma cannons, fi-"

"They've just been knocked offline, sir! Ion disruptor shot, it'll take time to reroute-"

"Never mind!"

Magnus watched the viewscreen, as a twin-cockpit jet streaked above them. Tactical reported at least two dozen Terrorcons that had apparently survived the Powerlinx Battles, a mix of falcon and beetle-types, led by three Decepticon jets, two gunships and, of all things, a robotic tyrannosaurus rex that was presently on the hull, tearing through the topside guns with its teeth.

"Prepare to engage mech to mech," he said into the ship's intercom. "They're too small and fast for the ship's guns to track! I want Grimlock and Swoop on that dino! Quickstrike, Skyblast and Overcast are to engage the jets and I want the Sky Scorcher Mini-Cons teamed up with each of them! RipTide, Smokescreen, Ironhide and the Land Military Team, clear out those Terrorcons!"

"But what about the two gunsh-" Ironhide replied.

"*They're ours*."

He briefly turned back to Longrack's viewscreen as he got up.

"That arsenal does *not* leave Combatron, Longrack! No matter the cost! Magnus *out*!"

Magnus unfolded, his body forming a massive weapons trailer. His central torso leapt from its cavity, opening up in midair to form Magnus' binary-bonded Mini-Con partner, Knock Out. Guns bristled along his surface.

"Let's *roll!!*"

"Can we risk an assault now?" Blurr asked. "We may have equal numbers, more with the Mini-Cons… but they're in tip-top shape and are toting around who-knows-*what* kind of weapons." He gave a weary sigh. "My Cyber Key isn't even fully recharged yet."

"Yeah, but we got the element of surprise," Armorhide volunteered. "*Plus* a native that knows the terrain. If worse comes to worse… we gots a *plan*."

Longrack turned. "*What* plan?"

The grin on Armorhide's face was mildly disconcerting.

"*My* plan."

"Good, good. That's most of the *really* good stuff… once we've packed the ship *tight*, we'll mop up the Autobots and leave this dirtball far, far behind."

Brushguard smiled to himself. They had moved the *Upstart* into the valley where the arsenal was buried and they were stuffing it with as many choice little bundles of death as they could. He'd strapped on a couple bandoliers of small arms and grenades, just for good measure.

He rubbed his hands together as he watched Buzzsaw and Runamuck slowly carry a large machine between them, the same piece Hardtop had inadvertently activated.

"We'll catch the Autobots by surpr*iiiiaagh!*"

A cannon-blast caught him on one arm, spinning and dropping him. Armorhide leapt through the air, dropped by Whirl.

"Better step up the plan, Petunia, or someone might beat you to the punch!"

Before he could hit ground, Swindle was in front of him, shock gauntlets flaring as he brought one hand around. In a flash of light, Armorhide went flying.

"You mean like *this*, scrap-for-brains?"

Buzzsaw and Runamuck dropped the heavy machine they were carrying, readying their weapons as Checkpoint and Longrack drove up.

"Oh, this reminds me of what the humans call 'Christmas'," Buzzsaw chuckled as his ribbon-beam pack hummed to life.

"Howzat?"

"Now we get to tear them open and see what's inside."

Brushguard pulled a charge from his ammo belt. "You'll pay for this, Autobots! *Nobody* sucker-punches me! You-"

He was cut off as a wall of blue light spun around him and when it cleared, he realized his weapons were gone.

Buzzsaw and Runamuck called their Cyber Keys and the beam of light sped towards them. Before the Keys could jack in to the Decepticons, the beam connected and in a flash, the Keys vanished, along with Runamuck's hand-cannon. The barrels of Buzzsaw's arm-mounted weapons were left bent and twisted.

The beam turned to Swindle, who took a futile swing at it and missed. He was knocked on his backside and his shock-gauntlets vanished.

Blurr became visible as the beam slowed and faded, turning back to the Autobots, now in robot mode with weapons drawn, joined by a slightly-dazed Armorhide. He coughed and dropped to his knees, Cyber Key tapped out and dumped the Decepticons' weapons and Cyber Keys at their feet.

+External energy source at zero point two-five percent + Deactivating reconfigured systems+

"*What'd I tell* you walk… in… the park…" he wheezed out with a grin.

"Brushguard, you and your forces have been disarmed," Longrack declared. "Surrender to the custody of the Autobot Army and you will not be harmed. You can't win, not this time."

Brushguard merely smirked. "Oh, *can't* I?"

In fact, none of the Decepticons seemed particularly worried. They weren't making any motions, just waiting as if expecting something. Checkpoint shuffled a little closer to Whirl.

"How many Decepticons did Grip-Lock say there were?"

"Five, sir."

"And… there's only four here, yes?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right, of course." Checkpoint paused. "He couldn't have been mistaken, you think?"

"Highly unlikely, sir."

"Just checking."

"Understood, sir."

Brushguard raised one arm and snapped his fingers.

Hardtop, shoulder still warped where Swindle had hit him, appeared over the crest of a hill, sniper-rifle primed… and behind him, a swarm of robots took to the air.

They looked like Buzzsaw, but in mottled, patchwork grays. The helicopter rotors hung back and down like swept-back wings, blue glows from their flight packs keeping them aloft, their heads little more than an array of optical sensors.

The Autobots' optics turned to the ground, where dozens of other gray robots appeared. They resembled Swindle and Runamuck, vehicle-mode parts like wheels nonexistent, heads reduced to little more than metal oblongs with a single visor for a face.

The right arm of each one ended in a multi-barreled blaster.

"Oh, *thrill*," Checkpoint muttered. "Decepticlones."

"Aren't they nice?" Brushguard smiled, clearly intent on enjoying every second of gloating he could milk out of the situation. The clones surrounded the Autobots. "Oh, I admit they're a little on the unfinished side, but really, when you're talking about a mass army of utterly obedient, completely fearless drone-units, the paint job is fairly unimportant. I must say, this certainly explains how they ended up with so *many* bodies littering this wasteland."

"How…?"

"You place a solider on the scanner pallet, sir," Whirl spoke up. "Once the scanner has the base schematics, it

can program virtually any manufacturing plant to create drone-units based on the template, though there are also smaller portable manufacturers that can produce them one at a time in rapid succession. All you need is raw materials."

"And this planet is nothing *but* raw materials," Brushguard grinned, waving to a random pile of robot husks. "So, as you can see, *I* have the advantage."

His smile turned feral. "Just think of it *this* way… the hunt for the Cyber Planet Keys will be *so much* easier now, and that bothersome black hole will be closed in record time… once the Decepticon armies tear apart the colony worlds! No more small teams skulking around for clues, no more diplomatic shell-games, no more pointless races, just quick and efficient brute force! Generally, I'm not one for slash-and-burn, but I'll make an exception in this!"

He stopped. Whirl wasn't looking at him.

He was eyeing the scanner template, which was still sitting in the dirt where Buzzsaw and Runamuck had dropped it.

Longrack noticed too."Whirl?"

"That's the last one on the planet, sir. Ours. All the others were destroyed. In retrospect, we probably should have done the same to this one."

"Don't…"

"Apologies, sir, but that's an order I'm going to have to disobey."

Both hands swung towards the scanner, cannon in each, launching a pair of rockets. One barely got out of the barrel before Hardtop's sniper-shot got it, sending the Autobots scattering and knocking the second missile off-course. The missile spiraled off into a crowd of Decepticlones.

Whirl was caught in a crossfire of blaster-bolts as every clone targeted him. The clones had poor aim, but Whirl's size and the sheer level of artillery hurled at him more than compensated for it. He was battered from all sides, finally falling face-first into the dirt as the Autobots returned fire.

"Scramble!" Longrack barked, bringing his shovel-arm around to smash through a pair of nearby clones, knocking them into another crowd. He glowed blue as he summoned his Key, arm swinging in a full circle around his shoulder-joint, ripping into the ground and hurling a massive chunk of debris into the air, downing a few aerial clones.

Blurr landed in the dirt, rifles blazing. He looked up to see Runamuck in front of him. The Decepticon was sneering.

"Think you're cute for taking my Key and gun, huh? *Skidmark, let's sic 'em up!!*"

A Mini-Con leapt out from the crowd, a small, thin black unit. It shifted in midair into a motorcycle and Powerlinxed to Runamuck's back.

Blurr rolled sideways as Runamuck brought both fists down, but the shockwave that resulted from the Mini-Con-enhanced strike threw him into the air. He folded in, transforming to vehicle mode and summoned his Cyber Key.

+External energy source at two percent, system reconfiguration in progress+

"Just enough!"

His rear side-panels folded down for his flight mode, his Key igniting his thrusters and giving him a controlled dive swooping level with the ground rather than crashing. He landed on all four wheels just as his flight panels, denied the energy from the Key, folded back up. Blurr roared off, putting his people's natural gifts to good use.

Runamuck howled, transformed and give chase, flames belching from his tailpipes, with Skidmark standing on his roof, firing pulse-blasts from his single optic.

Checkpoint narrowly missed the fire from Buzzsaw's chest-mounted machineguns, retaliating with a wild shot as he dove.

Buzzsaw sidestepped the blast easily, chuckling. "Hey, Autobot! Say hello to my little friend! Heavy Barrel, show him what you got!"

A bizarrely-cheery-sounding series of beeps carried over the battlefield and a small Mini-Con tank barreled into view, cannon tracking Checkpoint and unloading. The Autobot scrambled out of the blast zone and returned fire, flipping the miniature robot into the air.

Heavy Barrel transformed in midair and rolled, back on his feet quickly. He turned to Buzzsaw, nodded and leapt again, transforming and Powerlinxing to a plug on Buzzsaw's leg. Cannons sprung from the Decepticon's shins and opened fire as the Decepticon laughed.

Checkpoint managed to scramble behind a few clones, who took the full force of the blasts, giving him a few extra seconds to head for more cover. "Great. They got Mini-Cons," he muttered, back against a bunker.

Something chattered at him and he looked down to see Thunderstick, tapping his foot and giving him an expectant look.

"Oh. Hey, there. Sorry."

Checkpoint held out his left arm and Thunderstick leapt, folding up into his cannon-form and Powerlinxing with Checkpoint. Energies surged and Checkpoint could *feel* systems reconfiguring themselves as the Mini-Con's powers went to work…

With a rebel yell Checkpoint ran out from behind the hill. The wheels on his shoulder armor quickly began to spin, then each one spat out a hail of Gatling-cannon fire, shredding through clones and forcing Buzzsaw the leap for cover. A blast from Thunderstick's multi-barreled cannon form splintered the hill Buzzsaw was hiding behind.

"*My* little friend can whoop *your* little friend's skid-plate!"

Brushguard tried to keep hidden behind clones in the chaos. Suddenly, a shadow blocked out the dim sun and Whirl brought his blade down.

Brushguard managed to get his arms up in time, catching the blade with both sets of claws.

Whirl merely growled and pushed down harder. Brushguard could see he was severely weakened, armor pitted and blackened, the canopy on his chest shattered and leaking fluids from numerous wounds. But even in this state, he knew the Combatron was still a lot stronger than him and it wouldn't take long…

"You have a nasty habit of *surviving*," he snarled. "I'm going to have to break you of it."

He glowed blue as he summoned his Cyber Key, which appeared at his back before vanishing again. His chest lit up and a spear shot from it, harpooning Whirl point-blank. The solider staggered backwards a little, the tail-end sticking out of his canopy, then yelped as a mass of tendrils burst from the missile. Technorganic vines wired themselves around his limbs, wrapping around him like a cocoon. Whirl struggled and lurched before toppling over on his back.

Brushguard stood over the prone Combatron and smiled as the vines started on his head.

"Don't move."

Grip-Lock complained loudly at his companion, keeping an eye on the battle. No-one seemed to have noticed them so far, but the old Mini-Con had long ago given up on hoping for lucky breaks.

Skysickle stood on his shoulders, as his thin fingers worked frantically, cutting and rewiring.

[O1O1OO1O1 *step*O*up*O*the*O*plan* 11O1O1O1O1O11] Skysickle responded as Grip-Lock urged him to hurry up. [11O1O1 *see*O*what*1*s*-O*inside*11O11O1O1OOOO1O]

An animalistic howl caught Longrack's attention. He looked up just in time to see Swindle in mid-leap, gripping the barrel of his rifle and holding it overhead like a war-club. The Decepticon swung, bringing the butt of his rifle down hard into Longrack's head. Longrack staggered, lights flashing in his optics and Swindle swung the rifle again, catching the larger Autobot in the midsection. Laser blasts struck him as the clones closed in, his thick armor deflecting the worst of the damage, but nonetheless further disorienting him as Swindle continued his savage assault.

Blurr knew he was running out of steam. He'd been running at top speed for too long. He should have paced himself. He knew better. His Key was completely drained and his normal fuel reserves were about tapped out and he hadn't had a chance to properly recover from the beating he took earlier in his first encounter with Whirl.

He knew he would crash and burn any minute now.

Runamuck hit him from behind. Blurr skidded and he felt Skidmark land on his roof. The Mini-Con warbled, his voice sounding like an electronically-synthesized engine rev, and he fired pulse-bursts into Blurr's windshield, which finally cracked.

Blurr careened, throwing the Mini-Con off. Runamuck rammed into Blurr's side, flipping him over. He managed to transform in mid-tumble, his body crushing a few clones on his way. He landed, damaged and exhausted. He had nothing left.

Runamuck chuckled as the clones surrounded the prone Autobot.

Checkpoint dove behind a hill, barely escaping another volley from Buzzsaw. He'd lost his mortar cannon and one set of tire-cannons was half-melted. He checked Thunderstick. The Mini-Con had suffered a few new burn-marks but nothing serious.

"Holdin' up there?"

The Mini-Con responded with a low tweet. Though Checkpoint couldn't *exactly* understand him, he knew the reply was something like "Yeah, but it ain't gonna last."

"Well, if you can give me one more good burst, that'll do." He aimed Thunderstick upwards. "Buzzsaw ain't the sharpest… yeah, there's that rotor thrum… he's gonna be coming over the hill right…"

His arm exploded in pain and Thunderstick wailed. The Mini-Con went flying, slamming into a pile of scrap, twitching and groaning. Checkpoint jerked his arm down, which was already going numb; the Powerlinx plug had been blown off and without the Mini-Con power boost, he could feel his power ebbing.

He looked up to the sound of a laugh. Hardtop stood triumphantly atop a bunker with his rifle aimed right at Checkpoint's head. An evil grin played across his lips. Checkpoint looked up as a shadow covered him. Buzzsaw in helicopter mode hovered just above, Heavy Barrel and his lower cannons aimed directly at him.

"*Slag*," Checkpoint sighed at the clones closed in.

"This is too *perfect*." Brushguard stood over his captives, hands on his hips like a petty dictator. "Not only will I be able to hand Megatron a functioning drone-making apparatus, thus ensuring Decepticon victory by sheer numbers, I have five, soon to be *six* captives to hand over as trophies."

The Autobots kneeled before him, their hands behind their heads, except for Longrack, whose shovel-arm simply wouldn't *bend* that way. They'd made do with cutting the hydraulics to it, rendering it mostly dead weight.

Hardtop smiled. "So how much do you think a clone-maker, five Autobots and a Mini-Con are worth, Swindle?"

"Oh, quite a bit, big brother… in fact, I would bet Megatron would be so delighted he wouldn't even think to *ask* about what else we might have found here."

"Laugh while you can, Decepti-dinks," Checkpoint snapped. "You haven't got us all and Armorhide is going to-"

Runamuck hit Checkpoint in the back of the head. "Aww, what's he gonna do, cry at us? He'll be lucky to make it half a mile with the drones on his tail. Face it, Autobot. You got *nothin'*."

Armorhide peered over a pile of fallen machines. Several dozen clones of various types stood between him and the *Spanner*, largely motionless, awaiting orders or something to shoot at.

"Aw, what the smelt. We all gotta step off the ride *sometime*. Computer, deactivate internal dampers."

+WARNING: Deactivation of internal dampeners may result in systems damage+

"Override. Direct all additional power to arm-ports."

Armorhide slipped the pilfered nucleon shock gauntlets over his hands and the mag-locks snapped them securely into place. "Let's do some damage."

He leapt over the hillock, shifting to truck mode in mid-air. He gunned his engine as soon as his tires hit the ground. The light from his Cyber Key lit up the surrounding terrain as his front grill flipped down to reveal a missile rack. He immediately let loose with the full compliment.

The drones scattered but the missiles found their targets. Violent explosions sent drone parts flying through the air and created a wall of acrid, burning flames.

+ External energy source at ninety-five percent, feedback within tolerances+

He figured it would be too much to hope that he could nail them all, even with the enhanced firebomb power the Cyber Key had given the missiles. Laser-fire

sprayed out in his direction as a few of the smaller units ran towards him. He plowed through the first couple in truck mode and ramped over a prone body, changing to robot in mid-leap.

The shock gauntlets flared as he brought both hands down on the head of one of the Runamuck clones, crushing it instantly. A second clone appeared right behind the first. Armorhide kicked the decapitated clone into it only to catch energy fire from behind. He was in the thick of the remaining units and they were swarming in rather than dealing with blasters. He swung and kicked madly, sending drones flying, but two more seemed to rise to replace each one he knocked down.

+ External energy source at sixty-seven percent, feedback approaching dangerous levels+

He could feel his fists heating up, his internal computer telling him that systems were overloading as he continued to pour Key energy into the gauntlets. Even that was beginning to wane.

The drones kept coming. They were starting to simply grab him now, piling up and restraining him. Joints ached and circuits started to blow.

+External energy source at twenty-six percent, feedback critical + WARNING: Overload imminent+

Every head turned to the thunderous explosion in the distance.

"And *that* would be you losing," Brushguard gloated. "Load the drone-scanner. We're leaving."

A burst of orange-white energy pierced the air, striking the scanner dead-center, shattering the main plate. Currents of electricity surged over what was left. Each control panel started to smoke, then blew in sequence, sending metal and plastic pinwheeling through the air. Pipes and tubes burst. Finally the entire contraption collapsed into a pile of half-melted, smoking rubble.

For several seconds, there was nothing but the sound of cooling metal and the dying sparks of the cloner. Brushguard and the Decepticons turned slowly in the direction the shot had come from, the *Upstart*.

Brushguard's jaw hit the ground.

Skysickle stood in the middle of an open side-hatch of the ship. He dropped a cannon that was larger than he was, its barrel still smoking from the blast. The clang echoed across the canyon.

[OO1 1O1O1O1 1O1O1O*you*O*got*O-*nothing*OO111O1O111O1O1O] he snickered as he picked up another multi-barreled weapon, easily twice his size and hoisted it over one shoulder.

"*Get him you- OW!*" Brushguard stumbled as a nearby clone swung at him. "What are you *doing*?!"

All around, clones were wildly flailing their limbs, or shooting in random directions. The Decepticons dove for whatever cover they could find.

"The one drawback of the drone-units," Whirl remarked, voice cracking, "Is that they need the original scanner's control-signal to continue proper functionality."

The Autobots bolted. Checkpoint slung Blurr over his shoulder and carried him, smashing through drones as Skysickle laid down cover-fire. Several clones had started to smoke and spark on their own. A couple even exploded as their circuits overloaded.

The *Upstart*'s engines thundered to life, whipping up dust and debris. Brushguard saw another Mini-Con through the ship's main window, standing on the control panel and hitting the buttons with its feet.

The little robot turned, looked at Brushguard and made a surprisingly rude hand gesture despite having little more than simple clamps on the ends of its arms.

"My weapons!" Brushguard shrieked. "My *victory*! *MY FORTUNE!!*"

"*Screw* the fortune!" Hardtop screamed as he tore past in buggy mode. "*RUN FOR IT!!!*"

Brushguard turned, almost getting run over by the other Decepticons, who were also putting the pedal to the metal. He squeaked, then transformed himself, peeling out after them.

The *Spanner* came in low. Its engines were smoking and there were still a few clones clinging to its hull as it bore down on the bunker.

Armorhide grinned maniacally, servos groaning and circuits sparking with pain. The remnants of his left hand set the ship on its course… straight into the ground.

"How's *this* for a punch line?"

He slammed his hand down on the emergency release, blowing the hatch above him with explosive bolts. Two seconds later, he was rocketed out of the ship, the seat roaring skyward.

And then its rockets failed.

"Great," he mumbled.

The *Spanner* slammed into the bunker. The bridge erupted in a massive fireball as the ship's thrusters pushed it further into the ground. The impact threw ancient bodies miles away as the ship continued digging a deep groove into the surface of the planet. More explosions ripped through the vessel only to be joined by another blast as the remnants of the arsenal went up. Buildings in the distance crumbled as the underground warehouse collapsed. The whole countryside lit up with explosions.

Armorhide watched the scene as best he could in free-fall.

"Boy, are my arms tired," he chuckled to himself as he shut down his optics, waiting for the impact…

It never came. Wind whipped under him and a pair of arms slipped beneath his, pulling him upward. Optics snapped back online and he looked up into Whirl's face, flying in robot mode.

"Got you, sir!"

"Nice catch, private… Um…sorry about your backyard there."

"Not a concern, sir. It was a bad neighborhood anyway, sir."

"Nice one." Armorhide replied.

"Thank you, sir."

Whirl helped Armorhide into the open side-port of the *Upstart*, crawling in himself after him. Longrack kicked a steel crate out the side and closed the hatch.

Checkpoint smiled as he brought the ship up into low orbit.

"Well, that went pretty okay. Where to next?"

"A deca-cycle!? Megatron! Sir! Can't you just make a dimensional portal…? No, sir… I know… Yes, sir I *am* thinking about it…"

The Decepticons sat around a fire as night fell, using the stacked-up clones as chairs. Brushguard had his back turned to them, crouched over an emergency radio from the survival kit the Autobots had left them. Whirl's bunker had thankfully been in the opposite direction from the chaos of the exploding warehouse. There were *still* echoes as centuries of metal continued to collapse and settle.

The others couldn't hear what Megatron was saying, but it couldn't have been pleasant.

"No shock gauntlets, no ship, all we got out of it is some Mini-Cons and a handful of broken drones." Swindle slammed his fist down, crushing the head of one of his own clones. "And now I'm stuck here with you guys for *three weeks*!"

Runamuck leaned over and shoved something lean and papery into Swindle's hands. Puzzled, he looked at it…

… a comic book.

"Here… take it and shut up. I'm trying to read."

"These ain't half-bad," Buzzsaw murmured.

"Told ya," Hardtop replied with a small bit of smug satisfaction. "Now watch the creases, that's a first printing… Heavy Barrel, can you turn the page for Skidmark? He's gonna get tread-print on the pages…"

"Yes, sir, I know you don't brook failure…. Yes, sir, I am *quite* attached to my rear bumper… It's not my fault… There were Mini-Cons and… No… *No,* sir, I *don't* want to know what happened to Thrust first-hand…"

END