1. LOWTECH PROLOGUE

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MEANWHILE...

HERE IS THE NEWS, COMING TO YOU EVERY CYCLE ON THE CYCLE. A NEW SECURITY AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE SENATE AND ROBOCO DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION LED ROBOCO PRESIDENT AND C.E.O. **BULLETBIKE** TO MAKE THE FOLLOWING ANNOUNCEMENT.

TRANSCENDENTS AND OFFWORLDERS... R.C.D.I. IS PROUD TO TAKE ON THE CONTRACTS FOR PROVIDING EXTRA SECURITY IN AXIOM NEXUS AND THE OFFWORLD ZONES. OUR NEWEST VEHITECH DRONE TROOPERS AND THE FINEST PRIVATE SECURITY TROOPERS ON CYBERTRON WILL KEEP THE PEACE...

I CAN'T **THINK** ANYMORE, MY HEAD IS RARELY CLEAR.

...**WITHOUT** THREATENING THE AUTONOMY AND AUTHORITY OF THE OFFWORLDER GUILDS.

THE OFFWORLDER POPULATION HAS NOTHING TO FEAR FROM ROBOCO'S INVOLVEMENT... AND VICE-VERSA... I HAVE ONLY THE GREATEST RESPECT FOR THE OFFWORLDERS AND THEIR WAYS.

BUT I HEAR THAT NAME, THAT VOICE, **MOCKING** ME FROM THE DISTANCE.

IN FACT, I KNOW THAT, IN A VERY REAL WAY, I OWE EVERYTHING TO THE OFFWORLD POPULACE.

I'M SURROUNDED BY DEGENERATES, I'VE LOST EVERYTHING, ALL OF IT TAKEN AWAY... BY **HIM**...

EVERYTHING!

IN OTHER NEWS, A SERIES OF GRUESOME MURDERS IN AXIOM NEXUS HAVE BEEN CONNECTED WITH AN UNNAMED OFFWORLDER. THIS IS A ROUGH SIMULATION IMAGE BASED UPON SCATTERED WITNESS ACCOUNTS. ALL CITIZENS ARE ADVISED TO BE ON THE ALERT AND REPORT ANY SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY TO THE POLICE IMMEDIATELY.

I STEEL MYSELF, KEEP MY FOCUS. I AM ABOVE THIS. I AM SUPERIOR.

HEY, GOT AN ACCURATE TIME, BUDDY, MY CHRONOMETER IS ON THE BLINK AGAI-- OH...

N-N-EVERMIND... I... UH... GOTTA GO!

...TEN AERO-TECHNICIANS WERE TODAY SENTENCED BY THE JUSTICE COMPUTER TO BE BANISHED FOR LIFE TO SATELLITE PENAL: 1-1-1.

I HAVE ALL THE TRAITS OF A CYBERTRONIAN... A BODY, CIRCUITS, FUEL, A SPARK... I LIVE AND I WALK, I SEE... **AND AM SEEN.**

...THE ENERGY COUNCIL ANNOUNCED TODAY...

KAT-TOWICHHHHH!

I KNOW WHO I AM. I KNOW WHO **HE** IS...

THAK! THAK! THAK! THAK! THAK! THAK! THAK!

AND I KNOW WHAT IS **MINE**. AND I WILL TAKE IT **BACK**.

I AM **BULLETBIKE**.

AND I AM **UNSTOPPABLE!**

...FOR OUR REGULARLY SCHEDULED PROGRAMS.

Transformers Timelines Presents:

I, Lowtech

A Transformers: TransTech Story

by S. Trent Troop & Greg Sepelak
Illustration by Nick Roche, Colors by Winston Bolen

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"You've been less than cooperative."

Cheetor looked at the rather worse-for-wear mechanoid that sat across from him. The table between them was bare metal, like the walls of the interview room. Their guest was in the 'interview' chair. The entire room was dampened; those inside couldn't sense out of it, no matter how advanced their perceptive arrays were. "I want to help you, but you have to help me first."

The other mech sneered. "And as I've said, I'm not saying anything without my solicitor present."

"Oh, is that so?" Stungun strode up to the interrogation table and sat down in one of the free chairs. "Then you'd best hunker down for awhile, wheels… because we've got a problem here."

The other mech remained silent.

"See… the stuff you're embroiled in is so sensitive, your mouthpiece... well, he'd have to be two security grades up just to *speculate* as to what's going on here."

The mechanoid glared angrily at Stungun. "You're pulling my crankshaft to get me to talk."

"Actually, no, he isn't." Cheetor nodded for Stungun to move aside. "See, my associate here is down on his information. Your solicitor isn't cleared for this. Smelt, if it wasn't for a special dispensation, neither would we. But see, I can help you. According to the Barax Act, Section 35(B), statements made in the course of a police investigation are automatically declassified in regard to investigating officers and the involved legal counsel."

Cheetor watched the beleaguered mech as he worked this out in his head. "You're… you're saying that, in order for my solicitor to be involved, I have to testify to you?!"

"That's the long and the short of it."

The interviewee stammered a bit, looking briefly hunted, then indignant.

"That can't be legal!"

Cheetor shrugged. "I'm afraid it is… If you don't want to talk, fine. We can wait forever. But in the meantime," Cheetor withdrew a datacon and laid it on the table. He depressed its central control and swept his hand in a circular motion. The illuminated holo-display danced above the object, finally settling on 'full playback.'

"Maybe we should both take a listen. See if we can't fill in some of the blanks."

Begin System Recovery Record: Unit Designate PM4- "Bulletbike," Origin Universal Stream Primax 095.0 Beta
Memory Core and System Log Records, Recoverable Areas Mark Zorl2-Zorl4
Security Clearance Mark 7-J

Darkness, trapped in darkness. Something smothering, crushing me.

Pain in my side. I'm spinning, falling upward and to the left. The velocity is so intense! I'm going to smash into the ground! I'm going to -

Sectors Prior to AB19841.1 unrecoverable.
Sensor Net Online: Recalibration testing.
System Report: Motor function restored, power systems online. Weapon systems nonfunctional.

Ooowwwwwwwwww.

Hit the ground hard. Was I thrown? Did I fall? No… convulsed.

Came back online. Static in my head, in my senses… my senses. Where are all my senses?

Not… not all bad. The basics still seem to be there, though they're taking their time coming back to full functionality… and I'd only had the echolocation systems for the last quartex… got it on a lark, no big loss… but…

"fzzzzn"

Was that me?

Sight… do have normal sight. Sort of. Low-rez at the moment. A shadow, deeper than the darkness already surrounding me, moves towards me… covers me…

"Hey, you! Get up!"

A voice, loud and reverberating. Gnnngh. Rolling over shouldn't be this hard. The lights shouldn't be this dim.

Great Transcendence, the world shouldn't smell this bad.

The more my cognitive abilities and operative senses return, the worse I feel. I've got the zacklies something fierce.

"wstfgl"

"C'mon, on yer feet! You don't have to go home, but you can't defrag here, buddy!"

Where am I? This doesn't look like the Auron District. Who is that? Kind of boxy for a TransTech. Wait… is that a lowtech?

No, that's a bad thought; the proper term is 'offworld citizen.' The immense, black-plated, vent-mouthed figure stands on legs made of stacked crude-polymer wheels. I wish it would stop prodding me with that cudgel. My head hurts enough as it is.

"Who are you?" My voice is scratchy and pained.

"Officer Blastcharge, but if you don't get up in the next cycle, it's going to be 'Sir Please Stop Thumping Me Across The Alleyway.'" Is he really talking that loudly?

"You're a cop?"

"No, I'm the gaussin' Smart Patrol," he snaps back. "Of course I'm a cop!" He taps the badge on his chest for emphasis.

That's bizarre. Offworlders can't hold positions in security outside of the Offworld Zones. Wait a clik… that's a Security Administration badge, not Autopol. They only have authority in the Offworld…

"Where am I?"

"Zone Eight, Level Forty."

"I'm… in the Offworld Zones?"

"You're real good at asking real dumb questions, you know that?"

This is getting irksome. Time to take command of this situation and put this mech in his place. “Do you know who I am?!”

“You’re the wastoid bringin’ the property values even lower by slummin’ in the alley.”

That’s it. I manage to get to my feet, despite my body’s efforts to stay prone. “I am Bulletbike!”

“So?”

…what? Does this stupid sprocket not watch the news? I only employ fifteen percent of the offworld workforce!

Good grief, he’s tall.

“I am the CEO of RoboCo! Thirty-seventh richest mech on Cybertron!” Whoah. Nearly fell over there.

“Right, and I’m Grand Admiral Strika the Sixth,” he snaps back.

“Listen… listen up. One call to your commander… one call from me and I can have you quickly shipped off-dimension!”

His grill twists into a horrible mockery of a smile. “Oh, please, *please* call my commander. He needs a good laugh.”

Who’s in charge of the Security Administration down here? Oh, yeah… that insolent little whelp Cheetor. Always on about how the Offworld Zones need more security, then sent me a formal complaint about the Vehidrone units we sent in, something about… inflexibility and lack of discretion?

“I’ll have you kn–”

Hnaaaa. Equilibrium fails me. I stagger and hit the ground on my knees and hands, barely saving myself from landing face-first in a puddle of tepid… I can only hope it’s water.

…

The reflection… that’s… that’s not my face.

I’m… but…

My spark!... what have I done?

I’m a lowtech!!!

NO! No. No, I couldn’t have done… *this* to myself. Even in my worst over-stimmed moments, I would never have contemplated something so… I don’t even think there’s a suitable word in my lexicon for this. Full-form refits are popular, and they say the “retro” look is in… but… this?!

Someone did this to me. Someone has tr–

Sensor Net Failure: Sensory Overload, sectors AC77231.5-AD99233.9 unrecoverable.

–eed a place to recompile for the night, the *Widow’s Café Cybertronian* is forty clicks south. It’s cheap and the rooms aren’t completely filthy.”

The clunky-looking offworlder seems to split open, shuddering and flattening out as he transforms. Its vehicle mode is only slightly less ungainly than its robot mode, a six-wheeled armored monstrosity with a missile turret on its back half. The front end pivots towards me on a fragile-looking joint, headlamps seeming to stare at me with a baleful look.

“I’d hurry, though,” he snarls. “The Junkion Sanitation Service comes through here in five cycles to pick up the rest of the garbage.”

The very gall of that mech! Treating me like some common empty! When I find out who he reports to, there will be a reckoning! That self-righteous, condescending, offworld thug…

Huh. Seems to have driven off. I’ll have to find my way out of this area on my own and locate some *proper* authorities. At least I finally have a chance to take a good look at just what… what I’ve been turned into.

My feet… these are feet? Ridiculously oversized, and the vivid reddish-orange paint shows even through the filth that cakes them, in sharp contrast to the steel coloring of the rest of this form. A large, air-filled primitive polymer tire adorns the outer edge of each one. The tops of my feet are adorned with a bizarre alien script…

BULLE PM
TBIKE 4

I don’t even know what that means! The rest of my body is similarly primitive. My arms are blocky, unadorned and shorter than seems appropriate. A core-transplant into a cheap body frame seems to be the only logical answer, but how did I get this way? I don’t…

My last lucid memory… the party? Yes. The party celebrating the defense contract between my company and the Senate. Everyone was there. The energon flowed freely, and there was enough high-grade Schaeffer energy to keep us going for days. It was high quality, my own private stock, not the heavily-cut stuff the small-traders charge up with between sessions at the exchange. Everyone either loved me or hated me that night. I am the CEO of the biggest TransTech manufacturing consortium in the whole prefecture, so why wouldn't they? People are attracted to power, even if they make a contrary show of turning from it in jealous revulsion. Hate is every bit as attractive a force as love.

My memories of the party are hazed now. I recall surging out after eight or nine cycles… which is unusual. My systems are top of the line; I should be able to process that kind of intake for far longer with no ill effect. I hadn't even touched the isodrite or the polonium spritzers. I paid for the best! If I was ripped off… no… everything was double verified, and I'm a good host; everyone else was already on their second or third before I even touched mine.

And I was avoiding the additives, that sort of thing makes a short party. I'm not some stumbling…

Unless someone…

Could someone have added something to my…? Did I get all my drinks myself? Great Transcendence! Who was at that party?

Who *wasn't* at that party?

All that comes after that are dreams: Phantom agonies. A feeling of being crushed in an immense, cold hand before being trapped in a black void… a void that was cold and infinite, and at the same time as claustrophobic and confining as a coffin.

If I had more control over my systems…

Ha. Systems? This… this form's self-diagnostic doesn't even qualify as laughable. I can't tell what exactly has been done to me. But, I would have to guess, I've been stripped down. Had this crude, primitive offworlder form grafted onto my core. The urban legends, it would appear, are true. To think, I turned down funding for an interactive drama-script based on this concept because the plot was so ridiculously over-the-top.

Unfortunately, it seems the legends are only mostly true. The thieves apparently didn't see fit to leave a concerned note or deposit me in a tub of cryonic fluid after the fact. They stole more than a power coupling or my custodian system. A total system downgrade, the type they give murderers and would-be transit-bandits, the crooks that we wish to keep alive but harmless often get such a treatment.

But I'm not a criminal! I've done nothing illegal!… in the strictest sense of the term. I pay my lawyers quite well to be sure of that. Besides, that sort of punishment is then followed by imprisonment or exile, not an unceremonious dumping in an alley. My memory is scrambled, yes, but I *couldn't* have forgotten such an arraignment. There are militants and vigilantes that don't care for due process, perhaps one of them thought it ironic to-

"Hey, blockface, you got the time?"

The speaker is a… what are those fleshy ones again? A mass of organic material in the shape of some terrestrial lizard's severed head hangs on his chest, and the creature's hindquarters mounts on his right forearm. He carries a shield that combines both reptilian flesh and, strangely enough, simulated vegetable matter. His features are at once organic, robotic and hideous.

That screeching wail I suppose passes for a voice only adds to his repulsiveness.

"I do not," I reply quietly. There is something dangerous about this creature. I should probably put ample space between him and myself.

His hand is on my shoulder. He's *touching* me!

"Den you gots some fuel? I dun lost track uh my pals, an' I need some fuel tuh keep up da search."

When I turn, he's smiling with entirely too many teeth. Something glints in his free hand. His "tail" hides a blade in the hand he holds underneath it…

"I'm afraid not, friend." I try not to look at the blade. If he thinks I'm making idle chit-chat…

"Oh, I t'ink you do. See, you is movin' an' talkin', so dat means you got juice… so how we gonna to do dis?"

This… ghoul… would take fuel from a living mech to feed himself?! I have to get away from here! Where is that cop?

"Stop strugglin'! I only gonna rough ya up a little bit if ya co-op… coop… *stop fightin me!*"

No!

My fist shocks with pain and goes numb. I punched him! I've never punched anyone before! His jaw-flesh leaks mech fluid. Wow… that was a good hit! I must be a natural! He's off me, no time to think, just *run*!

Should I shout? What if he has friends nearby? Who do I shout for? Do the cops even help people down here?

There's something on my back!

Unngh! The ground hits hard. My face! Ow! He's on my back! Claws and teeth! I made him angry and he's gone for his beast mode!

"Give up! Give up an' I won't kill you much!" His voice is a hideous animal shriek!

No! You won't get me!

On my back! Threw myself over, but he moved with me! Agh! Right arm… only thing… *gnnn*… keeping… fangs… from… neck… have to… gah, that breath! Find something… free hand! What? Something cool, metallic… in the garbage… A pipe! Got it!

"LET GO!"

I swing! Brief scream, I caught his face… I swing again! Again! And thrust!

Hnnn. Hnnnn.

He's… my assailant… stops. I still feel his weight on me, but now… slumped. Good. Knocked offline. I let go of the pipe, pull myself from under him, and…

I don't hear the pipe fall. Uh…

I don't want to see, but I turn back…

The end of the pipe I had gripped is still sticking out… of… his…

That's not… merely offline…

The one unshattered beast-optic stares at me, the light that once shown in it now pitch black. The mechanoid's lizard-mouth is wide open in a rictus, fluid I can't identify streaming down its chin.

By the Nexus Zero itself! I've ki-

No, you can't be dead! Maybe you're just in stasis lock… how do you check for that?

Give me a sign of life!

No no no no *no!*

I didn't mean to! I was only trying to get away! It… how… It was too easy! An accident! It was his fault, he attacked me! He was like an animal… He… he was an animal!

I've… I've got to hide the… the remains. I can't get caught for this.

Where to… wait, this is Level Forty, the officer said, just above the Heap. There must be a chute nearby that will lead down. Even this supposedly more proactive Security Administration is unlikely to go that far.

I drag the body back into the grimy darkness, yes, a lucky break, a refuse chute, its cover rusted open who-knows-how long ago. *Uuunff*. There. I wait for the sound of the… the body's fall to fade as it tumbles. There. I'm… safe.

I think. I'd better get out of here.

What was that sound? A clink? Oh, my assailant's shiv. He must have dropped it in the scuffle. I… should take it. It's dangerous down here, I have to defend myself however I can.

It feels strange in my hand. I've had weapons before. My true form *is* a weapon. Yet this primitive, jagged spike of metal is so vicious and personal. Its very substance seems to wriggle in my grip, as though it begs to be used. The overcharge from the party's libations is starting to fade. The energy burn from the fight has made me feel light. I feel strong, alive…

And dizzy.

I… so… tired…

Can't… thnk… clrrrly…

Gonnnnnnnnnnnnnnaaaaaaaaaaaaa

Sensor Net Failure: Stasis lock enabled to prevent spark loss.
Sensor Net Online: Recalibration testing.
Sensation Log: Pain, .25 MegaEhrks (negligible), equilibrium sensor failure.

"...there buddy… are you alright? You functionin'?"

Everything hurts. Parts I was never aware of hurt. Optics flicker back online.

I immediately regret it. What greets my vision is possibly the most primitive Cybertronian design I've ever had the misfortune to stumble across. Its head is little more than a rounded-off wedge, completely undetailed save for a pair of bulbous, oversized red optics. Its body is just as simplistic, with pipe-like limbs sticking from a nigh-featureless torso. The whole form is tarnished gold, covered in dents and spatters of unidentifiable filth. A faded, scuffed offworlder Autobot sigil is barely visible upon its chest.

"cnnnt spk…nrrrrgy lwww…"

My vocal circuits haven't recovered from my forced shutdown yet. I'm at the mercy of this ramshackle wretch.

This is it. How much more undignified can this end be?

"You look like you've seen rough days, eh? C'mon, mister. Dangerous lyin' round 'ere. Let's get you up."

He's not going to- that… that's good. But I doubt he can support even half my weight without snapping in two.

"Too weak? They musta done you over good. 'Ere, have a drink, it'll give ya a real kickstart."

I'm in no position to refuse as a rusted, dented tin is lifted to my lips.

Waaaugh! Gak!

Sensation Log: Pain, .75 MegaEhrks (negligible). Gustatory Sensor Input: 19.2 MegaEhrks TAS2R38-42 (Potential Toxin, Initiate Fuel Ejection Reflex: Y/N? Reply Index N: Suppressing Reflex)

What is this?! The brew, whatever it is supposed to be, is foul and bracing. Yet… I dare not express my disgust. I need the energy, and I can indeed feel systems shuddering back to staggered functionality from their involuntary stasis lock. Best to force a smile and plow through it, though I know I'm going to pay for this later.

"I… appreciate it." Gah. Great transcendence, the aftertaste is unspeakable!

"Ey, I've not seen you round 'fore. What's your name?"

What would be the point of lying to this wretch? "Not that you'd believe me, but I am Bulletbike. CEO of RoboCo."

The derelict's head tilts. "The 'bolt what's always on the broadcasts? Wow. Good to meet you, sir."

Wait. What?

"You believe me?"

The creature shrugs. "What's not to believe? No one believes I'm who I am."

Despite myself, I am intrigued. "And who are you?"

The derelict tilts the can to its face, somehow taking a swig despite the lack of apparent mouth, wiping the rivulets that spill down its features afterwards with its forearm. "Scrounge is what folks call me, but that's just my *nom-de-guerre*, sir." He looks around conspiratorially, then one optic flickers in a wink. "But I'm really Emirate Xaaron, from universe Primax 093.0 Epsilon."

I almost laugh. This clunker? A variant Xaaron? The empty is completely insane, caught in the grip of a dissociative fugue. But… wait. Perhaps I am in the same state of dysfunction? No, it can't be so. No, I know who I am, and I remember my past far too clearly for this to be a delusion.

"Good to meet you." Might as well play along.

"You're wondering about the chassis, I can tell. Yeah. I managed to sneak in right quiet… past all the guards and big signs, right? Unfortunately, some skeev nicked my Matrix and *boom!*, instant downgrade. You seen it? About yea big? Like a crystal ball with 'andles?"

Oh dear. I don't think this primitive screw-head even knows who Xaaron actually is. Matrix?

"Nnnnnnno. Can't say I have, sorry."

'Xaaron' seems unfazed. "That's fine. Nobody ever does, sir."

Despite his overriding delusion, this Scrounge seems lucid and sympathetic. I… could use him. I started RoboCo from a scrapyard garage, surely I can reclaim it with what little I have now. Besides, I still have my wits.

"Scrounge… I was wondering if you could help me. I do not know my way around here, and I need to make it to an EconTerm."

He strokes his chin and looks me over. "Might there be a few liters of fuel in it, sir?"

I hardly know whether to be offended or impressed at his temerity. "Why not."

"Best transform for it… rolling is a mite bit preferred to walking, eh sir?"

Sensation Log: Pain, 18.7 MegaEhrks (within tolerances). Equilibrium sensor failure. Olfactory input: 17 parts per mil: oxidized lubricant.

It *hurts!* Why does it hurt? And what's with that *noise*? Am I backfiring? Does my muffler have a hole in it? How embarrassing! This entire frame is a deathtrap. I can feel lubricant leaking from my joints, hear it sizzling against other components.

"Great Genius, that was… unpleasant."

"They musta just got you recent… ain't used to transformin' in that body, are ya?" Say what you will about Scrounge, he is perceptive.

Hrm. My current alternate form is not too horribly dissimilar from my original. A rather simplistic cycle-form, oh, I appear to have a massive sidecar unit permanently grafted to me. So that's where those ridiculous feet go. Interesting… the sidecar actually features a secondary engine. Primitive, yes, but clearly built for raw power and rapid acceleration. I might actually be able to get an impressive turn of speed for a lo-… for a non-transcendent-tech form, though maneuverability is probably not one of my current strong suits. Well, it's one meager advantage, at least. Usable in robot mode, perhaps?

Scrounge himself almost seems to collapse. That same horrible noise accompanies his shift, but his sounds positively tortured. What in the… he has transformed into a battered disc, balanced precariously on its edge. That might be the most ridiculous vehicular form I've ever seen, and that's using the term "vehicular" in its loosest sense.

"Follow me, sir." He begins to roll forward, wobbling, and plows right into the shin of some poor mechanoid passing by the alley mouth, caroming off and skidding into the flow of traffic.

I find I have to put much more thought, more effort into even slow acceleration than I used to. Unlike my old gravito-cycle form, this crude body seems to bow to every last law of physics. Hrmph! At least I can be heard coming, and the foot traffic parts to let me through.

Travel in this configuration is easier, though the dull, rhythmic throb of my components grinding against each other serves as a constant reminder of my unfortunate state. Parts of my body, important ones, are not so tightly locked into place. My gyroscopic functions are wholly compromised. Oh, no, I'm leaking fuel!

No. Wait. This can't be! Astounding. I'm just burning through my reserves at a nightmarish rate. At this rate I'm lucky to get a few dozen kilometers per erg of energon brew. I cannot understand how I could be this wasteful. No wonder so many Cybertrons across the Multiverse are in the midst of a catastrophic energy crisis, if this is the nominal level of energy-efficiency in a bodyform.

Are my taxes paying for all this wasted energy? How far down in the zones do the energy skimmers run to pick up this wasted excess? I must look into this.

Later. Once I get back to where I belong.

Or perhaps just when I leave this madness. The streets are relatively clean, crowded with a plethora of robots from hundreds of Cybertrons. Not much organic life… isn't it said most organics tend to stick to the upper levels? Hm. I must admit, there is a quaint primitiveness to the main streets that clashes with the darkness of the alleys. I merge into the flow of the traffic, leaving behind the evi-

Sectors AL33525.7-AM03203.5 unrecoverable.

-ney up through the Levels is thankfully uneventful… yet in its own way an education. I've been through the Zones before, yes, but always in carefully planned and controlled visits to the upper Zones, promotional trips and inspections that look good for the holofeeds. I've never, ever been this far down into the city. It's practically another world. Several worlds, actually. The higher we go, the better things look, the streets are cleaner, the technology level rises, the degree of street life gets less uncouth… though again that's a fairly low bar to clear. It's no Metropolitan Xevox, that's for sure.

And compounding all this, I've never been so… so *unnoticed* before. I'm not sure how I feel about that. Despite my horrible situation, in an odd way, a certain weight has been lifted from me. It's certainly nice to not have cameroids pointed in my face non-stop.

Augh! It's not so nice to have some careless, hulking clunker's exhaust port venting in my general direction, though.

In one motion I roll past a red-and-orange feminine robot, another motorcycle-form, from a Primax world I'd wager, arguing with a somewhat shrill bright yellow automobile-type from one of those Malgus universes. In sharp contrast to the smooth-featured, almost rubbery Malganite, the facing alleyway holds a tiny, multi-armed jittering robot made of seemingly little more than silver blades. He darts about, staring up at the crowds with obvious malice, yatters in staccato at nothing in particular and carefully attempts to abscond with the personal belongings of an unsuspecting passerby. Yet only I seem to notice or care.

Hey! Watch it! Some inattentive clod nearly plowed into me as he stepped into the road! Whatever happened to vehicular right-of-way, you savage? If he hadn't been spritzing his arm with… was that water?… he might have seen me coming! Why would he be doing that unless… Ugh! Nuts and bolts are falling from his arm! He's got scraplets!

That's it. I've got to get out of this… this squalor.

Sectors A013485.I-BA00003.9 unrecoverable.

–haven't had to access a terminal of this type in gigacycles. I'd almost forgotten what they look like.

"Computer, establish link and transfer authorization codes."

My computer doesn't answer.

Oh. Right.

My computer isn't *there*. I actually have to touch the thing to operate it.

The unhygienic surface of the machine makes me loath to use a manual interface, but compared to what I've suffered so far this cycle? Maybe I should spill some of Scrounge's foul concoction on the panel. Surely that will kill any microbes on the pad.

Now…

Now…

Uh…

I don't believe this.

I can't remember my account number.

I can't remember my smelting *account number*!

"Problem, sir?"

I can't bring myself to look at Scrounge. "I… can't remember my account number. I typically let my custodian do these things."

"Your cleaning mech does your banking?" Scrounge sounds impressed. "You are posh."

Ugh. "No, my custodian, a supplemental computing system to deal with trivial functions."

"Oh, right. Like the animal-type bolts are always mumbling to? And they say I'm crazy… Ha!"

I know I should be more upset that my funds are out of reach… but this is more embarrassing than anything else. Bulletbike, thirty-seventh richest mech on Cybertron and idol to millions, and I cannot recall my account number because I've never actually thought about it.

Amazing.

Surely there is some way for me to pull forth the information from the depths of my consciousness. Some means of recovering the codes. But… I cannot focus. There's too much noise, too much banality to the action… and a tug at my shoulder distracts me as well.

"*What*, Scrounge?" I didn't mean to snap at him.

"Sir, you said you're Bulletbike, yes?"

Hnnn. "Yes, Scrounge."

"So who's that then?"

What?

I spin… and my own face, my real face, is looming over me in the sky. *Gah!*...oh, it's just a holoprojected news bulletin. The autofeed on the news projector tunes into my onboard communications hub and the audio breaks through as soon as I make eye contact with the feed image.

"Probably just a recording, I did dozens of these interviews each week." That should answer Scrounge's questions, and in a few moments the newscast will move to talking about my disappearance… or assassination.

"–and I'm confident that once the final arrangements are made for the security transfer, we will be able to stem the recent upsurge in violence and organized crime in the Offworld Zones. Let me just assure everyone that we here at RoboCo have no intention of repeating the mistakes of the past. The Offworld population is a threat to no one but themselves. Lethal force will only cause an escalation of hostilities."

… Wait a cycle. I remember this speech. I wrote it, more or less, but some words are different… and the delivery is all off. "Threat to no one but themselves"?! I'd never say that! It doesn't matter that it's true, you don't say that kind of thing to the low-… to the offworld citizens when you're trying to sell to them! I can already see scowls on the faces of some in the crowd. What kind of PR campaign am I going to have to run to undo the damage that verbal discharge will cause?!

Who is doing this to me?!

It must be an imposter… or…

"They couldn't…"

That was out loud. Scrounge is looking at me, yet I can barely see him. My own face is filling my world…

"They did…"

The truth is far too obvious and horrifying.

"They did what now?"

Sensor Net Failure: Error, Input Clarity Unconformable.

"Don't you get it?! They didn't dump my body! They didn't strip it for parts!" The world is going red again. The city streets pressing in, threatening to rip me apart. I can feel their eyes on me, the whole city is looking at me. Am I screaming? My mouth is open but I can't hear anything but that noise.

Great transcendence, the imposter is looking down at me!

It has me, gripped in my own, immense hands. My own reach out in a vain attempt to crush its grip.

"Sir! It's me, Scrounge!"

Huh?!

I slack my grip. I don't seem to have hurt him, but I certainly came close.

"I'm sorry. They stole my body. Someone else is in my body." The honesty feels good, somehow. It feels less insane when I tell it to someone else. "That's my antithesis up there, my enemy. He is responsible for this. He did this."

"Your nemesis, to use the standard parlance, sir?"

"My nemesis." The phrase tastes good coming out of the mouth. It tastes like purpose. "Scrounge, meet me back here in three megacycles. I… need to check on some things."

"Right, sir, I'll see if anyone in the Heap's heard anything about body stealing and see if I can find some fuel."

"The Heap? Isn't that dangerous?"

Scrounge seems unfazed. "Dangerous? Ha! Sir, sometime let me tell you about the time I faced down Unicron and his buddy Sideways. That was dangerous. The Heap is easy if you keep your wits about."

Oh dear. I may never see him again.

My companion crumples up into that wheel mode of his and spins off… and gets about ten meters before he caroms off some organic creature's food cart and into the crowd.

I can hear the occasional pained yelp of passersby long after Scrounge is gone from my line of sight. My path lies in the opposite direction.

The alleyways in the lower wards are dark and dank. I never appreciated going unnoticed as much as I do now. Twenty meters from me is a stumbling offworlder. If I recognize his design properly, he is a… what are they called? Oh, yes, an Omnicon, the type that typically immigrate from the Aurex Cluster, one of the jet-types. I have quite a few Omnicons working in my factories, now that I come to think about them; their internal energon-refining and crafting skills make them quite valuable workers.

This one is drunk on his own power, literally, but he's no empty. His white armor shines like new and down here, that means wealth.

In his inebriated state I can creep up behind him with little effort. My purloined shiv's point is at his back, between his cockpit and his main plate junction. The pain sensation has caught his attention. "I would prefer to do this some other way, but I need money. I am in a poor way and I need servicing, drop your credits and walk away and this will go painlessly."

"No need to do this, bro. I'm cooperating, just stay cool." His hands are raised but his fingers are twitching. Energon sparks are pulling between the fingertips. I know what he's doing.

That's the sound of the half-formed energon blades hitting the ground and discharging their energies. My hand is warm, numb and quite a bit closer to his back than it was. His body convulses, sending arcs of electricity into my hand. Have I killed him? Was it on purpose? I only meant to threaten him! But when he manifested weapons I just… moved!

He's still convulsing. If he screams, my mission ends here. My hands are on his head, twisting.

He breaks.

It's over.

And… that's it?

Something… something is missing. Thoughts of violence once came with their own pause. Time would slow and I could ponder all the consequences of what I'd done. I could calculate another being's place in society, the impact to myself.

Why don't I feel sick? Once, I got angry and threw a chronometer at Sidestep for misaligning my energon drip at the office. I felt sick for hours.

Right now I feel… nothing.

That's a lie. I feel *powerful*.

Ugh. Whoah. *Now* I feel a little sick… or is it worried? Feeling guilty for not feeling guilty is an unusual response. This must be what it is like being a lowtech; deprived of even the most elementary conscience programming.

His cred-key is well charged. It's not a total disaster. I just have to hide him is all. A dumpster ought to do, trash pickup isn't for days if Scrounge is correct… and who would know garbage better?… and the various parasites and scavengers down here won't leave much. I wonder if–

Sectors BC52386.7-BC52903.2 Unrecoverable.

–ecognize this place. They advertise on every offworlder Infostream with that infernal–

Three times the Swindle means three times the deal, come on down, it's a total steal…

–jingle.

Ugh. That's going to be stuck in my processor for megacycles.

And the neon image of those three psychotically grinning heads over the entrance will probably haunt me as well. I'm going to need a lot of psych debugging after this.

The door of the building pushes open easily enough and sets off a simple electronic buzzer. Despite the sheer amount of pomp and circumstance on the outside, the interior of the establishment is almost somber, and oddly bereft of customers. I get the impression that this trip may be expensive.

Good thing it's not *my* money.

A buzzing noise announces my entrance into the building. The lobby is empty save for a pair of mechanoids, I presume the operators of the establishment, that sit behind the large counter. The room is festooned with diagrams of body upgrades, posters advertising the latest adaptations available and off-the-rack replacement parts.

The two merchants are virtually identical in form; boxy, tan mechanoids with vestiges of an off-road land vehicle of some sort. Twin oily smiles greet me, and four oversized purple optics clearly size me up and tally the value of my parts. The only noticeable difference between the two is in their torsos; one has dark purple plating, the other cold dark gray.

Trans-universal doppelgangers working together is a rare occurrence, but not unheard-of. Most don't like the unsettling sensation of being in the presence of themselves. But it does happen, and some make it work.

I think they're insane.

"Good day, friend, welcome to Swindle, Swindle and Swindle," the purple-chested one says, in full sales pitch mode. "I'm, Swindle the Second, but you can call me Swindle. This here," –he waves a hand at the gray-chested one– "is Swindle the Third, but you can call him Swindle too. What can we do ya for?"

"I need an examination, a thorough one, heavily documented."

Somehow, the two manage to put extra grease in their smiles. "Excellent, a mech who knows exactly what he needs," Gray continues. "And maybe we can get you a tune-up while we're at it, you look rough."

"By the way, have you heard about our law enforcement special?" Purple continues, displaying an uncanny ability to synchronize with his other self. "Twenty-five percent off for all officers of the Security Administration, plus members of the Freelance Police Legion or the Fully Bonded Bounty Hunter Consortium."

"I'm not a cop."

I didn't think their smiles could get any bigger, but they do. Where did that recording device in Purple's hand come from? *"I'm not a cop."* the playback is clear and crisp. It is a rather obnoxious display, there, given solely to make a point blatantly clear. There is no doubt in my mind this building is crawling with recording devices, and not simply out of worry of theft.

"Excellent, now that we've got that out of the way, lets talk business… I've got everything you might need, friend. And I do mean *everything*." Their smiles threaten to cut off the top of their heads. "Oh, pity me, my manners are terrible today," Gray picks up. "What's your handle, friend?"

"Bulletbike."

"Say, that's a funny coincidence, you having the same name as the head honcho of RoboCo," says Gray, jerking a thumb at a poster on the wall. My true visage smiles at me from the thin plastene sheet, holding up a tray of M.Z. model reactor couplings.

What should be a friendly smile… now is sinister and mocking. I can feel my fists clench… must stay calm. Calm.

"They make the best halcyon reactor couplings on the market," Purple adds with a hint of genuine admiration in his voice.

I don't even bother to suppress my smirk. "Funny coincidence. I *am* the head honcho of RoboCo."

I'm impressed. Their unctuous expressions do not even flicker, even though the pause in their banter betrays a moment of incredulity. It took him long enough, but Gray now has a wand-like scanner that he is sweeping it over my frame. "That demands explanation. Get lucky at the scraps tables?"

This is a risk. However, they will need to know what to look for. "I was… attacked. I awoke in this frame. I believe my spark has been transplanted to this frame and I need evidence verifiable in a court of law."

Gray looks at the tiny readout on the device he holds. "Are you getting what I'm getting, Swindle?"

"Yeah, one of the newer-model Decepticons. Well, newer in relation to us, at least. Lucky you, our senior partner is an expert in that field." Purple turns his head to a door behind the counter. "Yo, Swindle! Got one for ya up here!"

I have to recalibrate my optics just to make sure they're not malfunctioning. That it's a third robot of the exact same construction as the first two is hardly a surprise; I'd have been more shocked if it wasn't. But the coloration! Where the others are sandy-tan, this one is bright red, with bizarre splotches of purple in a camouflage that would only work on certain rare, deadly jungle worlds.

Its chest bears the same version of the Decepticon sigil as 'my' lowtech body does, rather than the more common offworlder variety of his partners.

"We-hell!" this red Swindle oozes out, his smile matching that of his companions. "Swindle the First here, but you can call me Swindle. Bulletbike, isn't it? Knew one of you back in my home dimension."

Ugh. "I assure you, you didn't."

"This is the big bot behind RoboCo," Gray says, his normal oily delivery doing a commendable job of masking the sarcasm.

"Don't bother with the quips, I know what I look like. I am indeed who I say I am… and I need you three to prove it." They are off-world Decepticons, and I know what motivates their kind. "If you can provide evidence that I am the victim of a spark transplant, I will make it infinitely worth your while. Say, all the reactor couplings you can install, two percent over cost, for life?"

Their looks of dismissive condescension are gone. I can practically see what they're all thinking. *Yes,* they're thinking, *the bum is crazy… but if he isn't, then I'm rich.* I pull out the cred-card. "I will of course pay you the full price of the diagnostic."

What's the harm in taking a few cycles to check it out?, they're thinking now. *He's got money, we want it.*

"Step right this way, sir."

Red leads me through a back door that leads to a large, cluttered room of shelves and spare parts. That medical restraint harness was state-of-the-art when transformation was new, I'd wager. He's insistent on getting me into the chair, so I sit. After all the dirty things I've had to touch in this body, I'll be glad to be in my old form… or at least a comparable one. And several decon baths, if only for my own mental health.

"Now, you're wanting a full diagnostics service for your laser core and spark systems. Sign here." The holopad feels cold under my forefinger as I'm scanned for approval. "And pay here." I put the cred-key in his outstretched palm.

"Now this is going to hurt. A lot." The Decepticon moves behind me, outside my limited field of vision. "I'd better prep you with some localized shutdowns."

"Actually I would ra–

<u>Sensor Net Failure</u>: Electromagnetic Destabilization, .75 cycles to full system reset.

–ther you didn't." What happened?! He's standing across the room? Did he teleport, or did I black out?

I glance at the chronometer. I blacked out.

Those filthy sprockets!

"There you go," the greaseball smiles. "We're nice and done. Don't mind the tingle, your systems should sort themselves out in a few decicycles."

"You said localized shutdowns! You knocked me out completely!" The restraints are still in place. I don't like this at all.

"I never said where the shutdowns were localized," the creep shrugs as he strolls over, joined by a second Swindle, the gray-chested one. The two start removing the restraints.

A quick systems check shows I still have all my pieces, at least the ones I'm supposed to have right now. I can let this slide, for now. "What did you find?"

"Well, buddy," Gray begins, his manners as vile as his work area. "We did the tests you asked for. No laser core micro-fractures, no positronic variance spin indicators, and no abnormal immuno-response. We did find indications of prolonged stasis lock and octane inebriation, though."

"Your tests are inaccurate. Perform them again." My response was only as polite as the two deserved, and I really did not care for the hint of accusation his tone when he mentioned the inebriation. "And I wish to observe them this time."

Red is still smiling, but I can tell his patience will last only as long as there's money in it. "Look, there's no evidence of spark transplant. None. Nada. Zippo. Not a linkage. And considering the sentence that particular bit of illegality carries with it, we are regularly hounded by the government to make sure our tests for it are as accurate as possible. That stuff's the most expensive equipment we own, in fact."

"I'm not impressed. Run them again."

Gray's smile is more forced now. "Look buddy, we can run them all day and the results will be the same. Stasis lock in 'newer' models like yourself can cause side-effects. You know… loss of sensation, disorientation, momentary pain… even dissociative psychotic episodes." The smarmy lowtech smiles, and my engine turns.

"You believe I am a psychotic?"

"No, I believe you are having a difficult time adjusting to functionality and your systems are providing you with conflicting information."

"You've missed something. I know who I am."

"I believe you do, on some level." Red's look of fake concern sickens me. "Your tracking bolt identifies you as Bulletbike, from Primax 095.0 Beta. Isn't it just a little easier to believe that you are just confused after a traumatic shutdown?"

What is his scam? Best let him know I'm not a gullible mark. "Excuse me? Lowte… Offworlders can't read tracker bolts, that's why the Guilds enforce the spec cards."

"Seriously, Mister Bulletbike, are we that naive?" Gray sighs. "Listen, I'm a mechanic, not a debugger. I'm going to recommend you to an appropriately skilled mental health technician."

"We know a guy, we'll get you a good rate," Red replies. "Little mech, fits in the palm of your hand, but fragged if he can't weed out what troubles ya. I think Twi-"

"I've had enough of this."

"Whoah, whoah!" Gray says, stepping in front of me to halt my exit. "There's more you probably wanna know about. Look, let's drop the whole spark thing for the moment, okay? Let's talk about your *physical* condition. You got real bad stress fractures in most of your transformation joints, your fuel processor is clogged, you need new plugs, and you've got a crack in your distributor cap."

That gives me pause. As primitive as this body is, I will need it in better condition for what is coming up.

"And since your diagnostic work found nothing, how much of the diagnostic fee can cover those repairs?"

"None of it."

"Big surprise."

Oh, apparently I've said that out loud.

"You should read your work contract before you sign. You pay for diagnostic whether or not we find anything," Red replies.

Gah. I know to carefully read every contract from millennia of cutthroat negotiations, why didn't I do that here?!

It's this body. This stupid, limited lowtech body. My urge to put my fist through either or both of those smarmy smiles is almost overwhelming, but I must stay calm.

"But don't worry, that cred-key you brought in has more than enough for the work you need done. You want your firing system fixed?"

"What?"

"You have a built-in weapons system, looks like the control circuits for your transwarp mass-shunt system were cut out. Probably have a sidearm stowed in there someplace, inaccessible. I can fix it, but it will take some expensive parts."

Are they stupid? They're offering to arm me, even though my contempt for them is nakedly apparent?… hmm, that would be convenient indeed. Plus, I can always take my pick of their stock once I've put smoking holes in their greasy, smug little…

No. I can't kill them. What am I thinking?

They outnumber me three to one. They know this place intimately, and there is no doubt in my mind that this cesspit of a surgical theater is bristling with hidden weaponry. They've been assaulting the broadcast frequencies with their atonal jingles for hundreds of stellar cycles, they wouldn't have lasted as long as they had without taking precautions for such incidents. It'd be suicide.

No. They shall live. Regrettably. But for now, they're still useful.

"I need some other things as well. Tell me, can you pr–"

Sectors BE13485.1-BF00003.9 unrecoverable.

–never find this one. Why don't these lowtech thugs simply hand things over when they're outclassed? Is their lust for possessions that much stronger than their desire to exist? Still, this nu–

Sectors BK00405.6 -CA09779.2 unavailable. Audiovisual log range currently remanded to Senate Subcommittee 05.

–our regularly scheduled programs."

Andromeda's soft, bell-like voice carries through the air, echoing down the alleyway as I stare over the body. Some blue Autobot, ground vehicle of some kind. I was almost made. I've been careless. The very sight of my nemesis, even as a mere holofeed news broadcast, brings me to the brink of hallucination. And there is a noticeable shift in my emotional state. Anger and disgust seem to be the easiest emotions to feel in this body.

A few storage crates in this alley will make the blue Autobot out to be little more than a sleeping vagrant. One anonymous death isn't going to impede my action in the immediate future… but I can't keep killing like this.

The trail of oil will lead the authorities to me. And if I am caught, my enemies will finish the job they'd started. I can clear all this up, bury it when I get my position back. I can't let trivialities distract me from the job at hand. Whoever is masquerading as me, whoever masterminded this body-theft plot, is clearly doing this for a reason. But what is it? Control of the majority of the planet's security forces is a major factor, but even with my recall codes and backdoors, wresting control of even a fraction of the forces from the Senate's command would be impossible.

Perhaps they want revenge? I would like to think that my professional rivals would handle their feuds in a civilized fashion. There's always Ego, C-Kar's CEO. He might stoop to this kind of monstrous behavior, but he has no subtlety whatsoever. Were it him, my nemesis would be announcing RoboCo's merger with C-Kar Technologies and I would be nothing more than iron filings.

It's incomprehensible that I could have been so betrayed by one of my own. Yet who had access?

What if I'm not the only one?

A conspiracy of machines unknown, using illegal spark-removal technology to steal themselves into positions of influence… is such a thing even possible? Here I am, in a body not my own, a circumstance that should be impossible. I can't trust anyone. Even if I could convince them of my identity, who knows who might be compromised?

My nemesis knows. If I can get to him, I can get my life back and get to the bottom of this.

"Sir! Did you find anything out?"

Oh, no!

It's Scrounge! He must have found me on his way back from the Heap! What if he stumbles across the Autobot? Wait… I'm back at the meeting spot. I must have wandered back on automatic pilot of some form. I will have to try and keep focus. Who knows what could happen while I am thusly lost in thought.

"Just enough. *Just enough*. Come, Scrounge, there's work to be done. Do you know where a communications node might be found?"

"I think there's one over by Cryotek's place… just behind the disposal bins… but I don't think he'd want us messing around in his stuff, sir." Scrounge looks worried, shuffling his feet. "He gets… tetchy, they say."

"Nonsense, Scrounge! I'm certain you can keep them distrac–"

Sectors CA52386.7-CB52903.2 unrecoverable.

"Ego, do you want to be rich?"

"I am rich. Who is this?"

I'm glad I'd memorized his supposedly-personal comm channel range. He'd given it to me in an effort to appear friendly. Oh, it's doubtlessly being recorded and traced, but there's nothing for it.

For once… Ego has what I need.

I glance around… Scrounge is nowhere to be seen, but then again, neither are any of Cryotek's scrappers. The din emanating from his den of inequity is little more than a steady murmur here.

"You're not going to stay that way, Ego, and I'm a mech who can help you bring down Bulletbike." He's taking too long to answer. Best up the stakes a bit. "Of course, if you don't want my help, I'll just talk to Corvo…"

"Hang on there, friend, I'm definitely interested." I manage to suppress a chuckle. Funny, even knocked from my pedestal I'm still surrounded by 'friends.'

I steel myself. This is risky, but a necessary risk. I've taken several already, but drastic times call for drastic measures.

"The Mark III Vehidrones may look impressive and test well in the field… but they are in reality a nightmare of slipshod parts and substitute materials. Even a lowtech could take one down if they know exactly what to look for. I can provide you with the proof, and all I want is my bolt removed and passage into Axiom Nexus proper."

I can almost see Ego's smug face mulling this over.

"That's going to require some heavy proof. Bolt removed? A lowtech, hm? I can't do that, and you know it. But if you need access to the city, I'm certain we can arrange a pass for-"

"*NO!*" Stay calm. "No, Ego. I need you to get me in… under the radar. No passes. This is extremely sensitive information I have… and I'm sure you realize the risk I'm taking even talking to you." A pass. I don't believe this. I've just dangled the opportunity to embarrass, nay, *cripple* RoboCo right in front of his face, and he's going to sit on it while the bureaucrats compare forms?

Strutless. No wonder his company is faltering.

Indeed. My nemesis may have tendrils throughout the system. A pass, and all the checks that would be involved, would surely alert him to my coming.

"You're asking me to commit a Class-A felony, friend."

"You're boring me, Ego. I'm offering you a Class-A opportunity. I know C-Kar is about to get buried with the new defense contracts, and I know the only thing that can save you from the poorhouse is bringing Bulletbike down. And I have just the lever to topple him… but you have the clout to pull it."

I give him a moment to stew.

"Bolt removed. Passage out of the Zones, out of the authorities' notice. Now, do we have a deal… or does BioDyne get my info? Corvo is a mech of action, so I hear…"

There is a pause. Have I pushed too far?

"You can prove this, then?"

"I can bring you a deactivated Vehidrone core to examine yourself. One right off the street, in fact."

"Very well. Where do you want to meet?"

Heh. Perfect. "The Arclight District, by Vionax Tower."

Ego is playing right into my hands. If I can get my proof, then I can use him to get what I need. I can defeat one of my own Vehidrones. I'll probably have to address the safety concerns when I get control of my life back. It will cost millions, but getting my life back is worth infinitely more.

Now, to make the arrangements. I'll need to lure a drone to me without getting too many others. Where from, though… The Isen Power Station is too heavily guarded. I can't risk attacking a high-profile lowtech who might be on drone watch for fear of interference from the Guilds and the cops. Hmmm. Perhaps the D-Wy warehouse district. Yes, that would work. Class Yellow security, one drone, no one around but workmechs and drone units at night. It's perfect.

"Sir! I think we need to be running, now!"

Scrounge whips past me in his wheel-form. Behind him, a form comes out of the darkness…

N-no! I killed y-

No… it is the same form as the Omnicon who funded my trip to the body shop, but this one is green-and-orange, insectoid-face markings on its wings… and wielding a pair of long, curved blades, aglow with green energy. One of Cryotek's thugs.

Oh, yes. Running now. Cryotek is famous for not reacting well to others killing his staff, and I don't need more complications right now. My transformation is uncomfortable, but not painful. The feel of the air and the rush of escape from a knife-wielding maniac is… strangely exhilarating.

Maybe I *am* going mad.

"You empties stay out of our stockroom, for the last time! Next time I'm opening fire an' smearin' you all over…"

This is easier than I expected. I can do this, I just need to take char–

Sectors CB71386.5-CE74702.1 unrecoverable.

–ave to go it alone from here, Scrounge."

"Right, sir. Begging your pardon, but what your doin' is suicide, right?"

"No, I can do this."

"Really, sir… is it so bad down here? Yeah, your nemesis has got you by the bearings as it were, but you could start up new."

My job will be far more difficult from here on out. Were my nemesis's agents to find Scrounge, surely they would torture him and extract the information required to find me.

Can I risk that?

Doesn't he deserve better?

He's mad and lives in squalor… barely alive, really. It would be so simple to reach out and end him, like the others. It would be a mercy, liberating his spark from its prison of frayed circuits and rotting metal.

He's not even looking at me as he talks. I can feel the joining of his neck armor.

"Take care of yourself, Scrounge. If… If I find your Matrix, I'll bring it back to you."

Scrounge's head turns to me, tilts in that manner that I've come to interpret as his version of a smile. "Primus bless you, sir."

I take my hand off his shoulder, and he turns. He crumples up into his wheel form, and trundles away in a lazy, meandering path. I let him go.

I can't watch him go.

The risk is minor… and is no challenge a transcendent being can't overcome.

Yes, he's just collided with… a rubbish bin, I think, judging by the sound.

And… I can trust Scrounge. He may not be transcendent… but he is a good mech, given his endless limitations.

Sectors CE79386.5-CG82010.7 unavailable. Audiovisual log range currently remanded to Offworld Guild II – Freelance Police Legion: Security Division.

-y aim is true. The spanner hits the access door with sufficient impact to dent it. Given response times, I have seventeen clicks before the Vehidrone is on top of me. The crates won't protect me for long, but it should provide enough protection to keep me alive and uncaptured through this process.

There it is. The drone is far larger than I remember, moving with disturbing speed on two treaded legs despite its bulk. I should never have had them upscale the design we confiscated from whatever Megatron it was. “Bigger is better!” I said. “Size and potency over numbers!” I said.

As far as geniuses go, I’m an idiot sometimes.

The narrowest band on this weapon is a crude burst, but it should be narrow enough to avoid the surrounding impact sensors. The beam hits the drone’s optical visor, locking on just to the left of the back-and-forth scan sweep. The laser, too weak to damage the robot’s outer casing, is unnoticed. The mobile optic sweep moves closer and closer still until there is… impact!

My Vehidrone shudders for a brief moment as the substandard liquid crystal imaging system suffers a cascade failure. The laser, too weak to trigger defenses but too strong to adapt to, burns out every pixel in that location. The beam is gone and the drone continues to sweep its view back-and-forth.

The behemoth casts its gaze to my left, so I move left. Creeping right in time with its moving gaze I creep ever closer. Replacing the optic node for a few dead pixels would have cost me millions, so a mid-level engineer ‘neglected’ to include pixel failure in the internal diagnostic protocols. With the center of its optic node burned out the drone can see only in its periphery and through its rear sensor array. It doesn’t even know anything is wrong.

Slowly, carefully, I have to keep moving left to right with its video sweep, staying within the dead spot through the whole process. I get closer. I’m twenty meters off. Fifteen... ten... five... this is easier than I-

The drone must have heard me! Its view-screen is swinging back unexpectedly. I am only a few decimeters away! It’s now or never!

The impact of the ground on my knees is painful, but... Yes! I managed to duck under the monster’s view entirely. Removing the drone’s forward access panel is simple. That’s the last bolt. The drone is moving now, its internal alarms must have tripped.

“UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS DETECTED,” the heavily-processed voice thunders at me. Ah, yes, I’d insisted on something impressive-sounding. WVNG-class voice modulator certainly does the trick. At this range I can feel my armor vibrate from the force of the sound. “YOU HAVE THIRTY CLICKS TO ENTER MAINTENANCE PROTOCOL CODES OR YOU WILL BE MET WITH FORCE.”

Thirty clicks? What’s the point in having these sorts of countermeasures if workplace safety regulations will keep them from doing any good? Back in my office I swore those leaking-spark Autobot meddlers would be the end of me.

“YOU HAVE FIFTEEN CLICKS TO ENTER MAINTENANCE PROTOCOL CODES OR YOU WILL BE MET WITH FORCE.”

The force of the drone’s voice is one degree shy of sadistic at this range. I’d be scared oil-less if I didn’t know what I was doing.

My hand disappears inside the monster’s belly. I feel wires brush my arm and twist around my fingers. The wires feel good in my hand. My fist forms around them. There’s a symphony of small snaps and my hand is free.

I can’t help but smile as I toss the bundle of wires to the ground as the Vehidrone, now deprived of power, motor control and self-repair services, topples under its own weight.

“YOU HAVE FIVE CLICKS TO ENTER MAINTEN-EN-EN-en-en…”

Thank transcendence for leaking-spark Autobots. Now, to retrieve -

Sectors CH20666.5-CH22415.2 Unrecoverable.

–ps out of his transport. Ego is taller than I remember… no. No, I am currently shorter. Gnnnn. His body type is from the Mark K upgrade, practically an antique compared to my true self’s Mark L body. The silver and blue form continually reshapes itself with every step, every movement. As he extends a limb, his hand forms into an elegant mockery of my lowtech body’s own appendage.

That arrogant sprocket.

I take it, and give it a careful pump. “Glad you could make it.”

“I suddenly found myself with some free time in my schedule,” he sighs. Ego withdraws his hand and looks me over. He is either the weakling I always assumed he was, or he suspects that I am more than I advertise. He regards me with the same sense of latent hostility and suspicion that he regarded my old form. “And besides… you’ve made some very interesting claims. I assume you have the proof?”

I don't even try to hide my smile as I activate my storage relay. I withdraw the crystalline sphere and hand it to him. "Processor Matrix from one of the Vehidrones, ripped straight from its body earlier today."

Ego holds it up, optics telescoping out of his head to examine it, extra nodes splitting off to give it multiple passes. Why do I suddenly find the sight of this unsettling? Such minor and temporary physical reconfiguration is commonplace among the TransTech.

Is it this body? Some residual coding from the spark that… *euugh*… once inhabited it?

"You could have hefted this out of a junkyard," he rumbles… but I can tell he's uncertain at best.

"You know better than that. Defense Contract Regulation LX-92-K: all combat-grade artificial intelligences of Class Six and above are to be recycled or destroyed upon failure of an individual unit and are classified as controlled materials, Category Eta." He looks impressed. "Nice attempt at maintaining bargaining posture, though."

"I think I like you, Mister…"

… oh smelt. I should have thought of my alias ahead of time.

"Wildfly."

Wildfly?

Ego nodded. "Shall we be on our way, Mister Wildfly?"

Where did "Wildfly" come from? This form can't even fly! My *old* body, my *true* body can't fly, it merely hovers a few meters above the ground on antigrav discs in vehicle mode! I'm slipping too much. Thankfully, Ego doesn't seem to notice, though. I suppose I can't blame him too much for expecting a lowtech to have such a ridiculous, ill-fitting name.

"How do you intend to get me through the security checkpoints?"

Ego's left arm unfolds and churns, regurgitating a small band of silvery metal inlaid with blinking lights. "With this. A signal dampener. This should keep your spark undetected as we go through the checkpoints."

Despite myself, I'm impressed. Highly illegal, that little piece. Oh, the damage I could do to his company if it got out he had one…

Frag it, Bulletbike, *focus*. He still has a purpose to serve. I must get out of the Offworld Zones.

And… of course, there's a flaw in his plan. "I'll still read as a mass of offworlder technology."

Ego smirks and opens the rear hatch of his transport. Heaps of junk of offworld manufacture… mostly old terminals, a Teletraan-class computer, and a few random weapons fill the vehicle's storage cavity. "What's all this?" I am legitimately confounded.

"I have been 'antiquing' in the Zones, let us call it. As I do every so often. Border security is quite used to seeing offworld tech signals in my vehicle. Get in."

Ugh. Bulletbike, thirty-seventh richest mech on Cybertron and idol to millions, and I re-enter my world buried under obsolete scrap metal. Wonderful. The plan makes sense, but it does not for one microsecond mitigate the sheer indignity of it all.

I shut down my olfactory sensors as best I can as I gingerly step into the pile. Oh, he is going to p–

Sectors CI80666.5-CJ00415.2 Unavailable. Record Removed By Order of Military Police in Adherence with Security Protection Protocol DR-Y8.

Ego walks me along the hall of his building with unmitigated, well, ego. I've been here before, and had made sure to observe everything I could that first time. It was a "friendly" meeting, in that nobody killed each other. Ego wished to discuss a merger. I told him precisely what he could do with his offer, in graphic terminology. The memory is perfectly clear, as are most of my memories of Ego. I hate him. So many other memories are a blur. Just vague impressions and details lost to my old body's memory banks.

The halls between his offices are a museum of antiquated technology. Treasures plundered from dozens, hundreds of offworlder cultures line the walls. Most are weapons. Ego collects them to remind himself of his own exalted position. A lowtech might do the same with the sharpened sticks and black powder weapons of organic societies. By nominal TransTech standards, these are quaint instruments of destruction suited for a museum like this one rather than for active use.

My current predicament has made me anything but *nominal*, however. There may be potential here, hidden among the fusion cannons, energon weapons and 'holy' relics. Nestled next to that pedestal, however, is a security guard. He is tall and cradles a neutronizer rifle in his arms. He is a TransTech, his body is an older model but still quite formidable.

I just have to remember where the weak points are…

"Evening Mister Ego," he says cautiously.

“Oh, good evening Aurik. This is Wildfly, he is a guest touring our facility, and may have some... *contributions*... to make to the museum.” He turns his attention back to me. “Enjoying my collection, friend?” If condescension were currency, Ego’s tone would have made him the richest mech in Axiom Nexus.

“Yes, it is... impressive.” I try to sound awed. Instead it comes across as dull sarcasm.

“Most of my people look down on our Offworlder friends but I admire your varied cultures. Even your weapons are works of art, each one with its own story to tell.”

Oh, please. I may backflow.

We walk through the corridor to a massive double door. “But you have yet to see the greatest of my achievements. I keep those in my private office, where we can discuss business.”

A blast of cool air hits me in the face as the doors slide open without a sound.

Now, despite myself, I am impressed.

The office overlooks the whole of the city through windows of polarized plexiluminum. A massive desk dominates the room and the windows are lined with pedestals, upon each sits a small display piece. But above the desk is a crystalline blade above a placard that reads “Sword of Megatron.” Suspended in the force shield is a flawless purple hilt, with a blade of green energon, faintly glowing with the bizarre taint that the Unicron Phenomenon has imbued on the crystal. A truly deadly weapon.

Of course Ego would have it hovering over his desk like a mere toy.

“That’s an original, you know. Not one of those cheap Omnicon knockoffs.”

I know this game all too well. He wants me to sit here and get nervous in the presence of what is a museum of unimaginable power to a lowtech. He wants to see me vent, weaken, so I am unprepared for the upcoming negotiation, off my game.

There’s a reason RoboCo is handily beating out C-Kar, however. I always win this game.

Yet part of me is in awe. It must be this frame. Residual memory. It’s an embarrassment. I must transcend this form and remember what I truly am.

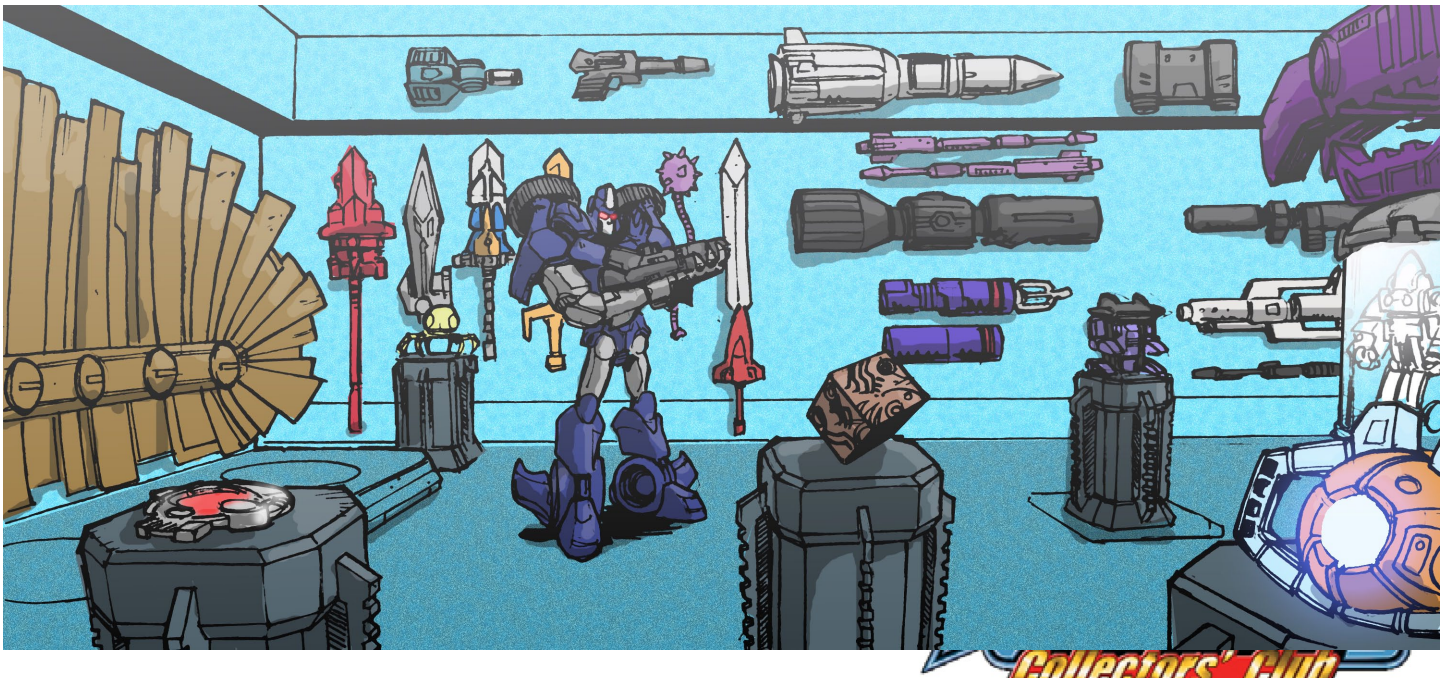
For all his arrogance and banality, Ego’s taste is exquisite. His parties are so lavish and well-attended. His office continues the museum motif from before, only here are the true prizes… devices that most lowtechs in the city below would give their left servos for, and probably several others’ as well. His desk is a Bricolo original. He bought it the day before my first visit. He knew how much I love a good Bricolo.

“I see you like the desk. It’s a Bricolo, made from the salvaged shield of the lowtech Decepticon Emperor Scorponok of Primax 787.3 Alpha,” he continues, in a tone not too unlike those despicable Swindles. “Yes, you’re impressed. You have a Scorponok where you come from?”

“Yes.” It isn’t a lie. Of course I know a Scorponok! He is the same one Ego knows; the bartender at the country club.

“Then you know how expensive that was.”

His random assortment of treasures should be an affront to Cybertronian taste, but they aren’t. He has some bizarre talent that lets him make each of these trophies into an expression of his only redeemable quality. An Earthen musical instru-



ment made entirely of gold is arranged right next to a perfectly preserved Requiem Blaster, there is a… yes, it's a Cyber Planet Key, of all things, golden metal fangs and nails framing an emerald crystal, not one of those credit-a-dozen silver varieties, beyond that is an reconfiguration matrix, then a spherical Vok artifact and further still… is that a plush lizard?

"Hi!" it squeaks at me when I pause in front of it. Ego is not only arrogant, but he's insane. That's just ridiculous. This single anomaly is placed in the center of the collection, perhaps even intentionally. A single aberrant mote, an imperfection designed to bring out the rest of the assortment.

I hate him. I've always hated him.

Hate must surely come from the spark, because every memory of loathing or hatred is clear as crystal.

These items of power… so like Ego. Every one of them is illegal within the confines of Axiom Nexus' Offworlder Zones. Well, maybe not the lizard. Many have been the focal point of wars that have devastated worlds, even whole realities. Ego is using them as decoration for his office.

Fashion without substance. I am smarter, harder-working and more connected than Ego. Yet somehow… somehow he can have all these things. If they are to be in TransTech hands, they should be mine. I could study them properly, bring them into public museums where people could see them, thanks to me and my genius. Yet here! Here they are in a wasteful display of wealth and disdain for the lowtechs who covet these items and the TransTech that might find some purposeful use for them. I see the way he smirks as I peruse his treasures. He takes perverse joy at having them in his secret sanctum, beyond their reach, never to be used.

But they do have power. Most transcendents consider them quaint artifacts of a primitive species. Rightly so, really. But, I can certainly… wait, is that forestonite? How by the grand Nexus does this talentless failure of a business-mech get his hands on forestonite?! I had to substitute solitarium during the series seven Ariga experiments, but this… hack… managed to get *sixteen kilos* of it and just *put it on display?!*

"Eyeing the forestonite, I see?"

Not yet. "Let's get down to business." I wonder if my voice might betray my thoughts. "Here's what you want." I activate a subspace storage pocket in my left forearm. It tickles. I withdraw the recording of my test run against the Vehidrone. He catches it with one hand. Thankfully, his body, albeit slightly out of date, is still a TransTech form. The cartridge is subsumed into the folding plates of his hands. The data transfer is nigh-instantaneous.

"The optical sensors on the drones are sub-par. You can burn them out with a low-power laser to make a blind spot. The laser intensity required doesn't trigger self-preservation measures and the diagnostic doesn't test the optic node for dead pixels. Then you can just slip right up without them seeing you."

He gives me a long look, a fraction of a second too long for my liking. "So, tell me, just how did you come by this information, friend?"

I'm ready for it. "You might say that I used to work with Bulletbike."

"Indeed? What is it you do with RoboCo, again?"

"Back then, R&D. Now, it's murders and executions, mostly."

Did I say that out loud?

"I started off in mergers and acquisitions," Ego replies nonchalantly. Either I imagined my verbal slip, or he's a more inattentive fool than I had previously thought. He strides to a window, staring out over Axiom Nexus, and right at my company's tower. "I always hated having to pretend that laying mechs off was tragic. I felt so phony."

I don't like his inflection on 'phony.'

"I know what you mean. I hate being phony too. That's why I'm here."

"Indeed." Ego spins and looks at me. His optics are glowing brighter than I've ever seen. Maybe he's not quite as staggering a fool as I thought.

Is he getting bigger?

"Interesting indeed. Because we did a little check on you on the way here. It's not all that hard to find out information on offworlders working on more sensitive transcendent technology. After all, it's pretty rare."

He strides across the room, towards me. Is it getting dimmer in here? I stop myself from backstepping. It's just another intimidation game…

But… he is… getting…

"There's no record of any 'Wildfly' in all of RoboCo's employee files. Which would mean either Bulletbike is hiding who he's paying from the government, a delicious little piece of information, or you're lying about who you are, and your ID bolt calls you a liar."

My...? Oh, *smelt*.

He's getting closer. And bigger. Plates are moving across his body into a battle mode.

"You're right," I reply. Confidence returns. How could I have ever forgotten my superiority over this clot? Even with this unforeseen obstacle he is playing right into my hands. His overconfidence is his undoing. He thinks me a mere lowtech. He doesn't know who I really am.

"My name is Bulletbike."

Now.

The hypo-syringe of nucleon from that wastrel is in my hand, and I charge, using the motors in my feet to propel me with force the last meter between us. I leap and lunge. Surprised, not expecting a charge, Ego swings to backhand me.

Hnnnnghah!

The room spins, the pain is great as armor buckles… but the needle finds its mark.

The hypo-syringe pierces his adaptive outer plating easily. TransTech armor is meant to take explosives and energy weapon fire, and regenerate almost instantly, but a simple piercing weapon applied to the right place can deliver quite a payload before the armor reacts. There it goes, the plates rip the hypo free and toss it out.

But it's too late.

"You worthless lowtech scum!"

I can't help but laugh, Ego has me around in the neck with one of his hands. He's crushing me. My vision is obscured by flickers of white noise.

Sensation Log: Pain, 25.5 MegaEhrks (Beyond Tolerances, system damage imminent).

I have to hang on just a little longer.

"What did you…" The armor plates are shifting, they ripple like a wave is going through him. It's beautiful, in its own way. The blessed relief as his hand goes slack is nothing compared to the delicious irony. Even as a lowtech, my superiority is apparent.

"Sorry, Ego… can't quite hear you… yeah, nucleon abuse is a glitch, isn't it?"

My foot finds his abdomen and he falls down. The impact of his midsection on my boot is like the best upgrade I've ever had.

"You should have upgraded with the rest of us, old friend!"

I cannot linger on such base pleasures… I must act quickly before the nucleon spreads too far. I grab his wrist, the hand that mere seconds ago was attempting to crush the life from me.

"But you liked the Mark K form. It's so slagging pretty, isn't it? How it constantly transforms, makes new parts for itself on the fly, no stable modes, just constant transformation…"

I pull this body's weapon from its mass-shunt storage, a crude slug-throwing cannon. Its multiple barrels spin as I take aim at the space between the twitching armor plating of his forearm and hand, mere millimeters away, delicate nanofiber sinews exposed.

"Please…" He's nothing more than a shuddering mass now, voice strained and rasping.

"Which you can't do anymore. Full body paralysis and a complete shutdown of your defenses, automated and otherwise, as that small injection of nucleon self-replicates, spreading through your systems."

The buzz of the weapon is deafening, yet I still hear Ego's scream. It's taking more time than I anticipated for the cables to give. I stomp on his arm and twist, the cannon still pouring depleted uranium into the gap.

Almost there. I return the cannon to storage and pull out the shiv that has served me so well so far. A few hacks, and the hand pulls free. Perfect. A few short strides and I'm at his desk. I tug at the tips of his index and middle finger, and they pull free on cords, ends unfolding to reveal datajacks.

Standard security check system. Fool should have developed a custom grid. It only takes a few taps of the holopad to bring down the artifacts' security fields.

All around the room, the air shimmers as the fields vanish. The field surrounding the sword above his desk is the last to fade; I quickly snatch the weapon from the air before it falls. This will be quite useful. Everything here will be very useful indeed.

"Hi!"

Gnngh. Almost everything.

"*H-h-hhhhhhhhwhy*…"

I turn to look at the pathetic form at my feet.

"Because you wanted to take my company, because I don't need you blabbing to the police before my work is done, and because I just don't like you."

His voice is little more than a rasping, sputtering wheeze at this point. His optics, strained, look up at me, begging for mercy, pity. "*…Bhhhllllletbk-k-k-k? Izzz… r-r-r-rrrlly… youu-u-u-u-u*?"

"Do you really need that much of a hint, you stupid sprocket? And you call yourself a transcendent."

I raise the Sword of Megatron overhead. I shall give him the mercy of d-

Sectors DA00330.2-DA00615.2 Unrecoverable.

… no, I won't take the lizard. So monumentally unimportant, let it stay here, a testament to Ego's folly.

That Cyber Planet Key, on the other manipulator… yes, surely I can-

Non-Sensory Data Source, Unidentified: A roar of a world… countless voices raised in a cacophonous, savage din…

What was that?! Some security system I did not disconnect? No, the indicators all read green. It… must be this inferior body. I've got to get out of it. I'm clearly losing rationality. Hallucinating. I'll take the ke-

Non-Sensory Data Source, Unidentified: Unbearable heat as the breath of hunters closes in… rush of wind as fang and nail are bared… sharp, cutting pain… smell of freshly-spilled oil…

Gah! It bit me! How?! How can…

Non-Sensory Data Source, Unidentified: Primal growl from a million sparks… a warning…

Hnnnngh. Right. Fine. Fight me, will you? I don't need some idiotic cosmic tchotchke! I am transcendent, I will reclaim my body without you!

And then I'm coming back for you, key!

"Hi!"

"You shut up!"

Now. To get out of here with minimal obstruction. This may be tricky. Nothing from the guard outside yet, I don't appear to have set off any alarms. Leave it to Ego to set up a complete dampening field inside the office, completely locking himself out. Made his own coffin.

Getting through the whole tower without Ego… no. And I can't afford to fight my way through unfamiliar territory.

The window? It's quite a long way down… and I can't fly. Never could, even in my true body.

Wait. I can't… unassisted. I was right. Those relics outside will serve a purpose.

The door slides open. The guard looks up with an expression of boredom. From his position, he can't see into the office properly. Good. But he eyes the Requiem Blaster in my arms with deep suspicion.

"My contribution to the gallery," I say nonchalantly as I step forward.

He's shifting into a fighting stance but I can see hesitation and uncertainty. "Ego's already got one of those."

"Oh? Pity."

The weapon's cry fills the room, and the twisting, spiraling beam hits its mark dead-center. I was always a good aim. Oh, his bodyform is sturdy, but it doesn't matter. I know this weapon, how well it works. We've somehow still never been able to replicate its effects to the full power of the original, but we've certainly come close.

The force of the blast pins him to the wall, scattering lesser weapons. The beam's ever-changing harmonics quickly adjust, exploiting weaknesses at a molecular level.

It is over in seconds. I must act fast. That surely raised an alarm somewhere.

Thankfully, my prize is easy enough to claim. An archaic Autobot rocket-pack. Still fully-fueled, excellent. It magnoclamps securely to my back, and I rush back to the office. Plexiluminum is strong, but the Sword of Megatron cleaves it easily.

As the wind of the city fills the room, I cast one last glance at my one-time rival.

That felt *good*.

And I step out, the pack flaring, slowing my fall. Now, to my to-

Sectors DA01330.7-DX15815.2 unrecoverable.

-just walk in through the front door. The building seems so much larger than normal right now. The high, vaulted crystal walls that serve as molecular computational systems seem so impressive. I can't help but smile, the sound of my footfalls against the plastistone floor is soothing. That was totally worth three times Cyclis's annual salary to put them in.

"Excuse me, you're not supposed to be here, this is a secure area."

"No time to talk, Cyclis."

The gunshot stops her from hitting the security recall button. The antimolecular reagent gun puts her offline fast. I hate to manage so harshly, but she commonly stole file-disks for personal use; and she would have stopped me from doing what needs doing. Twenty meters to the left, security drone.

Takes two shots. Quadcurse this weak lowtech frame.

Thirty meters, right up the stairs, second and third drones. That's better, one blast for each.

The stairs. I know they're fashionable, but really, that's because the fashionistas can all fly.

Third floor. This is what I have to worry about. The security guard garrison is behind this door. They are the best. I should know. I hand-picked them, even designed one or two. Still, intellect is what will win this battle. The rigged bomb in my hand fits in my palm; just a Vok artifact from a Maximal-held world, a jury rigged detonator, the Reconfiguration Matrix and a zero-point energy catalyzer from Ego's climate control system.

I slide the door open a crack. The bomb rolls from my fingertips, its lopsided shape makes it thrum gently as it moves. I can hear it sliding back and forth. There's a gasp, a hurried shout, the security guards have seen it. I'm disappointed they reacted so slowly. They're obviously not worthy transcendents. I must choose their replacements more carefully.

I feel the world lurch sideways. I throw open the door and stand, just out of range, as the swirling cacophony of color and sound engulfs the room. I stare into the brainchild of one of the few races as transcendent as my own. The radiation breaks down probability, binding each object inside to all its possible states through the transwarp barrier. The result is chaos, an endless cycle of destruction and recreation as every errant thought twists the new, psychoreactive nature of matter in every plausible direction.

The guards are shifting, evolving in a thousand different directions at once. The light fades. I should touch it. Bathe in it myself. At worst I would be destroyed, but I could transcend beyond even what I was. Perhaps I might even become as they are. Pure spark, given form and power and existence in some distant multiversal nebula. I had no idea it would be so beautiful. I must take this chance. I leap forward...

I waited too long. The driver-bomb's main field is gone, leaving only the residual energy that courses through the guard staff. I envy the grand adventure they are going on. Walking past their shifting forms is a simple matter.

I hope one or more survives, this kind of open mutagenic experimentation is hard to come by.

My most dangerous trial is behind me. This should be simple from here on out. I know the path to my office like the back of my own purloined hand. It is but a few meters away. I must suppress the well of fear in my gut. I am the transcendent here, body notwithstanding. The battle will go to my favor.

It simply cannot be any other way. It is impossible.

"What do you mean you don't know how he got loose?" That voice is my voice. My true voice. But tainted. Perverted with fear.

My nemesis.

"He's coming straight for me. Do you have any idea how many mechs he's killed?" He's on a communications link. He does have accomplices. Once again my theories prove correct. Just two meters away now.

"I've withdrawn half the security units in the city but he's gotten through somehow, and now the power is out. It doesn't take a TransTech to figure out…"

One meter… to destiny.

"Yes, I said half. What? What plan?"

It only takes a moment for me to catalogue my remaining weapons. The sword appears in my hand with a rush of displaced air and transwarp energies. It destroyed my rival. Only fitting that it liberate my body.

"Hello?" His voice is strained, it is time to act. The door makes only the barest of sounds as it opens.

The interior of my office is as immaculate as ever, yet everything is in the wrong place. My desk, my holoart, my terminal, all shifted. Standing at my desk, is me. This is no hologram broadcast or reflection. It is my body, moving and shifting without my control.

"My nemesis, you have underestimated me." If I pump enough rage, false courage into my voice he won't notice how much my sense of vertigo overwhelms me.

"What the… Wh-who are you?"

Hah! The crude spark that has my body is afraid!

"Who am I? I'm you. Or more accurately, you're me. You pretend to be, at least. You're a cheap knockoff sent from the pits to destroy my life, but you failed." I snap the sword to its full length. The room lights up in a sickly green glow from its radiance.

"Listen to me, you're an escaped mental patient, you're very sick… but I want to help. Just put… down… the weapon."

"*You first*!"

The engines in my feet hurtle me forward, their roar and my own scream merge. The heft of the blade pulls me along. The world screams through sparks and impact. I have his arm, my arm, our arm. I/he/we are dismembered. There is no pain. I'll take back my being a piece at a time if I must!

The glow from his remaining hand…

Sensor Net Failure: Sensory Overload, .002 cycles to full system reset.

-tronic disruptor. Wrong arm! Lost focus, forgot! My left, not his! Sword took the brunt of the blast. Shattered. Second time today… hefted by the neck. Not my neck. His neck.

Staring at me. Those optics, ones in the broadcast. Mad and hate-filled. My optics! Sword's light gone… the room glowing red. World is twisting, wriggling around me.

I scream! Feral… limbs lash out! *Gnahgh!!!* Pain! Nemesis's stolen body… my body… hurts to hit! Everything… a *nightmare*!

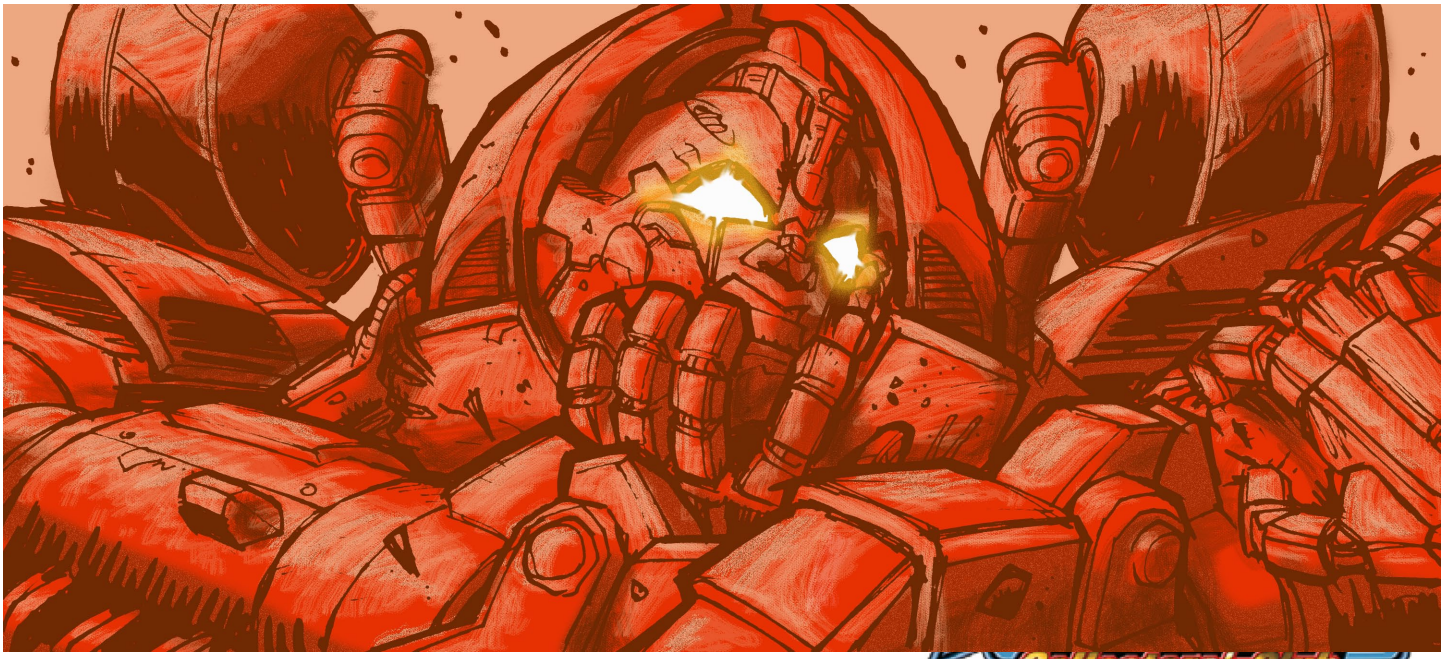
Gyaa–

Sensor Net Failure: Error, Input Clarity Unconformable.

"Stop. Hitting. Yourself!" Disruptor… glowing again.

Everything hurts. If I leap now… There! Missed, barely, the floor explodes into a shower of sparks behind me. Armor burns. *Keep. Going*.

"You should have stayed where we dumped you!" He admits it! "In fact, I should've crushed the life from you myself! I don't know how you escaped, but you'll wish you hadn't!"



Got to get closer. I ram into him, his body braces against mine and we lock. His hand is around my neck. He's turned the blaster off.

"You're pathetic. Without your body you're nothing. You're just garbage, no skill, no desire, just mindless rage and a desire for revenge. And yet here I am, transcendant. My body is perfect and my mind knows what need and effort feels like." His body warps. The thorns he's sprouting rip into my very spark. I couldn't do that. This isn't real. I have to focus on what is real. "I can do anything you could do and more, and that means I can do *anything*."

Focus on what's real. His body is real, my body is real.

"You forget, I was you, I know your weaknesses…" Keep focused, lucid.

"What weakness? You're bluffing." I am, he doesn't know it.

"One thing… I… *khaghk*... can't do!"

"What?"

"*Fly!*"

Engine guns full force. Hit my body… hard… pushing. Plastiglas… shattering. Millions of blades of light… stolen hand claws at old face… pain… my body slips away.

My.

Nemesis.

FALLS!

Old life… tumbles downward… streets below. Watching. Body tries to change shape… no pain. No pain… my body tries without its arm… to save…

No pain… I tumble, smash against the building…

Hit the catwalk… no pain…smash into the ground. I left a crater and yet...

No pain.

Hnnn.

… Over.

Bulletbike is dead.

It's over.

By Nexus Zero… I've done it!

Bulletbike has done it.

Bulletbike has survived his own death.

Bulletbike is *immortal*.

The doorway is opening behind Me. I turn so slowly that only the most cunning of machines could detect My movement. I am the ultimate transcendent… for I am beyond even death. Is this trembling form entering one of My supplicants? A TransTech warrior with gun drawn in salute of my majesty. His features are frozen in shock!

Surely he recognizes My omnipotence.

"Freeze!" he shouts. He raises his weapon and aims it at Myself. I am unafraid.

"It is all right, officer," My voice says. "My nemesis has been dealt with. I am functional."

Others are following. They move slowly, carefully across the room… doubtless in awe of My power.

"You are under arrest for multiple counts of homicide, the attempted murder of Bulletbi-"

I laugh. "Ah, your comprehension fails you.." So simple, these mere mortals. "I am Bulletbike. The true Bulletbike. Surely you do not think I have tried to murder Myself?"

"FREEZE!!"

They don't believe Me.

"It is alright, unenlightened one. I can prove it. Just as soon as I get My old body back… you don't recognize Me in this humble form." I pick up My arm from the ground, ever so slowly, and pace backwards.

"*I SAID FREEZE!!!*"

"I just need to get My body back. Just wait here." The sensation of weightlessness as I take the first step to reclaiming My lost glory is transcendent. The crude battlefield of My office fades into the distance. Soon I will reclaim what is Mine.

Soon-

Log Ends

"Quite the transwarp jaunt there, eh?" Stungun tapped the datacon to switch it off. "I gotta admit, even with the big blank spaces, its pretty damning."

A brief flicker of dull dread crossed the TransTech Bulletbike's features, then quickly switched to smarmy anger. "I was attacked and nearly killed by a lunatic stalker who, by this tape, managed to kill numerous offworlders and TransTech citizens and you're putting *me* to questioning?!" Bulletbike said with a sneer of contempt on his face. "Is it any wonder the Offworld Zones are in chaos?"

"How did he know how to access your location, or find the flaw in the Vehidrones?" Cheetor paused. "Oh, yes, let's not forget that. No matter what, you're looking down a massive charge of fraud there."

Again, the pause as Bulletbike sought for a response, Cheetor noted.

"I… I can't be certain. I suspect corporate espionage. I didn't even know about that flaw myself. Why would I withdraw flawed security units to defend myself?"

"And there's the matter of that… it's a funny coincidence that this stalker of yours managed to get wound up and pointed in your direction just in time to pull the majority of the forces to your facility… right when they'd be needed at the Transwarp Complex."

"I… I admit, I panicked! I withdrew units to protect myself from a killer! It's not like the police were any assistance! What do you want from me?!"

"I want a name, Bulletbike. Who were you talking to on the comm? *Who warned you about the killer?*"

Bulletbike's only reaction was dead silence.

Stungun leaned in again. "What, you think they're gonna help you now? Seems to me whoever you were talking to has left you to the Preditrons. Maybe even sicced 'em on you themselves."

Cheetor stared hard. Again there was a look of uncertainty that seemed so alien on the features of the thirty-seventh richest being on Cybertron and idol to millions.

"I want my solicitor," Bulletbike said, as if clinging to that mantra in the vain hope it would save him.

A low tone drew Cheetor's attention to the door. Cheetor transmitted the proper access code and the door phased out of existence. Beyond it, a tall, winged TransTech with an expressively humanoid face stood waiting with an air or annoyance.

"Commander Cheetor. A word out here, if you will?"

Cheetor rose slowly, casting his gaze once again on the injured and defeated-looking Bulletbike before leaving the room, sealing the chamber behind him.

"Good day, Starscream. You're a little late, aren't you?"

"Clearance issues." Starscream's voice was cautious and even. "The Senate is not pleased. Not pleased at all. If you ask me –and the Senate will– we had failures at every possible point in this whole scenario. The Offworld Zones security forces failed to apprehend a violent serial killer on the streets and your Officer Stungun failed to handle that selfsame offworlder and take him alive at Bulletbike's office."

"With all due respect, Officer Stungun followed standard protocols. The victim had dozens of Vehidrones guarding his building, set to kill anything that came close, and the perp had heavy-grade weapons tech. No officer in my employ is going to be stupid enough to run face-first into the mutagenic weapon like the one the perp used on the building staff. For all we knew he could have set off a quantum singularity in there. And if you don't hate quantum right now, you would if a chunk of the business district were locked between potential states for the next seventy-nine vorns as the fallout died down."

"And exactly where were you during Bulletbike's rampage and the solar cycles leading up to it, Commander Cheetor? Do you routinely allow murderers to wander your precinct unmolested?"

Cheetor's features hardened, but he remained still. "Just off the top of my processor… the Gutcruncher rebellion and the ongoing black market raids, two riots, the incident with General Demolishor, sixteen murders unrelated to this case, twelve armed robberies, three major traffic snarls, fifty-six minor accidents, and four inter-faction rumbles. Plus, all the times the Senate has 'requested' my personal appearance. We're stretched thin even with the assistance of the Freelance Police Legion. If we're pointing servos, however, border security, which is under your jurisdiction, was egregiously lax in investigating Ego's transport. Personally, I'd be worried about what else is slipping through."

Starscream sniffed, optics dimmed. "That matter is being investigated, I assure you."

Cheetor paused for a few moments, and the two watched in silence as Stungun continued to verbally pick away at the prisoner.

"This is a very, very unusual case."

Starscream did not answer right away. Cheetor never liked the Decepticon, but could now see a lot of worry and weariness in his stance. The last ten megacycles had been brutal for all involved. Neither of them had even had time to wash off the debris and burn marks from the Transwarp Complex.

"You're certain he's tied into the Complex incident?" he finally replied.

"I believe he is, though I don't think he realizes he was. Smells like a patsy."

"Please tell me you have other theories about our murderer, Commander. If this spark-swap theory of yours turns out to be true, the implications are dire."

"I wish I did."

"Then perhaps you can tell me *how*?" Starscream asked, looking up at the ceiling in frustration. "We've run every known test on both Bulletbikes! There is no sign of a spark-swap whatsoever! No tech in the Multiverse does it that clean! And yet…"

"Yet a spark-swap answers everything about the last few solar cycles, including how TransTech agents could have been compromised. It is quite the tidy explanation, save just how in the Great Void the swap was done in the first place."

"The existence of meddling Quintesson wizards can answer any question at all, but that doesn't make it *true*." Starscream shook his head. "We can't find any kind of concrete connection between Bulletbike and Trion. All we have is the fragmented internal recorder of a now-deceased mech in the grip of numerous psychotic episodes. If this is the true Bulletbike, we've got nothing but questions and a lot of dead mechs. But if the real Bulletbike did indeed die in a lowtech body..." Starscream turned suddenly, optics blazing. "I will not have a panic. We've managed to cover up that the lowtech snuck through to the outside, thankfully. In a sick way, it's somewhat fortunate he didn't leave too many in any state to recall what happened. But if the populace buys into the notion that TransTech citizens are being kidnapped and replaced by lowtech ghouls, then paranoid recriminations and mass hysteria will rip through all levels of the city, probably along faction lines."

"I've already assembled a special task force to investigate the Zones, discreetly. No Freelancers, just my most trusted mechs under my direct supervision."

Starscream frowned and pointed accusingly at Cheetor. "You are to keep the details on this quiet. These orders come from mechs so high up you'd need a stepladder to polish their toes, and we will not have faction-war come about because a *beat cop* can't mute his vocoder."

"Understood."

"On that note… have you found this 'Scrounge'?"

"We have. Put up a pretty merry chase, I have to say."

"And?"

"I believe he's being treated to a warm energon cube, and Hoist's looking into fixing some of the more severe stress fractures in his left leg."

Starscream's response was slow. "You're… pampering him."

"He's a sick mech, not-"

"*Commander*… consider yourself and Scrounge lucky I simply have not the patience today to fight with you over matters of petty sentimentality for offworlders. Fine. Ship him off-world. I don't care where. Give him one of your little happy-ending dumps on some opulent planet for all I care. Unlike those detestable Swindles, he hasn't got the common sense or fear of authority to keep it on mute. I want him out of my dimension before he stumbles into a reporter for one of the tabloid feeds. Are we clear?"

Cheetor simply nodded. "Crystal."

Rather unlike himself, Starscream hesitated. "One more thing, before you are dismissed, Commander?"

Cheetor paused. He wasn't used to hearing that tone from Starscream before. "Yes?"

Starscream stared intently at the door to the interrogation room. "Find my mechs. One way or another. Just… get me answers."

"… Will do, sir."

Within the interrogation chamber, Stungun had just completed berating Bulletbike when the door phased out of existence. Starscream strode into the room confidently, every hint of his weariness having vanished in microseconds.

"Starscream," Bulletbike looked up at the newcomer. "It's about time the consulate-"

"Stungun, you're dismissed," Starscream snapped, much to Bulletbike's shock. "Military Police is taking it from here." Starscream turned to the prisoner. "Of course, anything you want to tell me, right now, well, an open interview can't be classified, now can it?"

Bulletbike glared at Starscream in disbelief. "You taking over as the bad cop, here?"

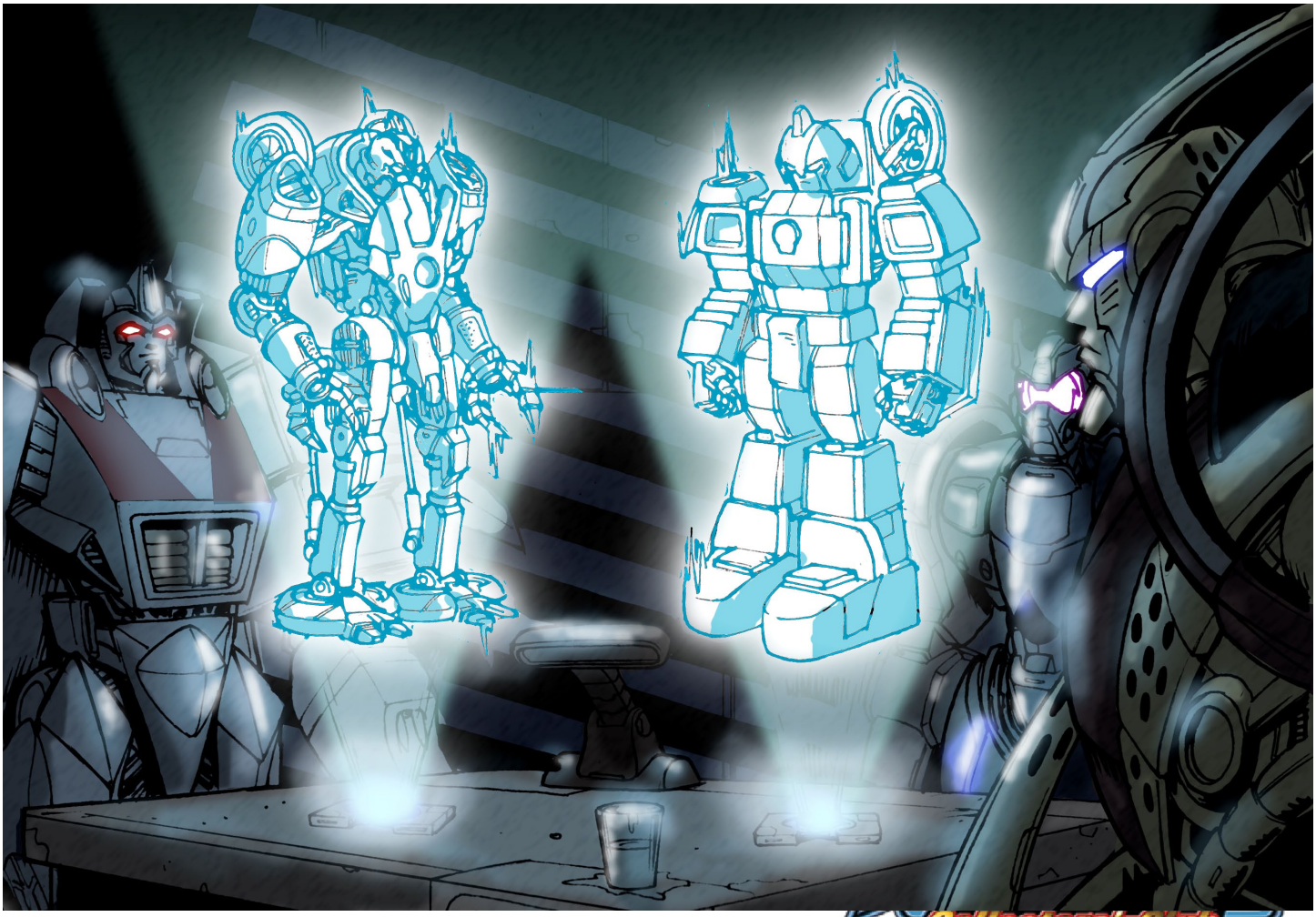
Starscream's smile was almost serene. "Oh, no. No. I am the *worst* cop."

From within the observation lounge, Cheetor and Stungun watched what would later be referred to as a 'vigorous' interrogation of the captive Bulletbike.

"Permission to speak freely granted, Stungun."

A seeming lifetime ago, Stungun would have regarded an unsolicited statement like that from a commanding officer with the deepest suspicion. A lifetime ago, speaking freely landed him in the Offworld Zone Security Division.

"I hate to say it, sir, but…" Stungun paused. "Everything just adds up wrong. The dead Bulletbike knew too much. It's theoretically possible for an offworlder to have figured out the Vehidrone flaw so early… but I pulled his specs from the Order of Bureaucratic Enlightenment. Intelligence index of five? No way he could have done it, or rigged that horrible mutation bomb. And he knew too many details about Ego, about this Bulletbike's office, about life outside the OZ."



Cheetor remained silent. Stungun knew he wasn't saying anything his commander hadn't already thought of, but it needed to be vocalized. "What's Starscream think?"

"That we're in deep slag no matter what. He doesn't want to believe that the swap is possible. Then again, neither do I."

"Science doesn't lie, they say…"

"True, because a lie has intent to mislead. Science also sometimes just doesn't know, and right now, science is stumped." The Commander sighed. "Starscream is right about one thing though; We've got to keep this quiet. No matter what the truth of it is."

There was a long pause before Stungun spoke. "Do you ever worry about regressing, sir?"

Cheetor gave Stungun a careful look. The mech looked uncharacteristically unsettled, placing a hand on his chest. "Without our clarity codecs, I mean, if that really was the CEO's spark inside the offworlder…"

Now wasn't the time for word games.

"Every waking cycle," Cheetor replied. "I wouldn't have asked it of you if I hadn't trusted you, or had it done myself. The clarity codecs were made to ensure that everyone had that little voice that said 'don't do that, it's a bad idea.' But a lot of smart machines theorize it's had the opposite effect. Punishment and reward for bad and good behavior produces ethical *responses*, but chasing pleasure and dodging pain doesn't really make you a good mech. When the program fails, or is removed, you get…" Cheetor waved a hand at the recorder box still sitting on the otherwise bare table in the other room. "Well, you just heard what you can get."

"If Bulletbike is what can happen when the system fails… why take the risk in voluntarily removing it?"

"Did you know that some organics willingly ingest non-lethal doses of deadly poisons?"

Stungun stopped, unsure of where his commander was going with the seeming non-sequitur. "Uh, no, sir?"

"It's to build up an immunity. Small, careful doses. Their body learns to fight it. Eventually, they can handle amounts that would, under normal conditions, kill them. So, think of this as building up an immunity to the urge to kill."

Stungun shook his head. "I… guess that makes sense, sir. But I lost my temper with those two grease-stain chiselers, what if…"

"Have you committed any murders I don't know about?" Cheetor smiled, a genuine smile, and clapped his hand on the officer's shoulder. "Hold on to that. Don't worry, I wanted to knock their smug little heads together too. Millions of supposedly 'lower' mechanoids in this city have gone gigavorns without crossing the line. We're supposed to be 'transcendent'… if we need some piece of code implanted in us to foster basic morality, then what's the point? The trick isn't not having those feelings, Stungun. It's learning how to handle them. We augment the body, but not the spark. *That* takes hard work."

Cheetor strode across the room, and Stungun fell into step behind him. The two pressed on, to face the aftermath.

"Besides, if you crossed that line, you'd be wearing a restraining bolt before you hit the ground."

END