TRANSFORMERS TIMELINES PRESENTS:

SPATIOTEMPORAL CHALLENGERS

CHAPTER 2: HIGH NOON

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Five travelers rolled along the dusty highway toward the state line of Oregon, making steady time without so much as a sign of their enemies, and day rolled into dusk. Moving along in SUV mode at a few miles below the speed limit, Small Foot could almost convince herself that their mission would continue this smoothly. They would arrive in Oregon tomorrow after their three airborne teammates, and exchange handshakes with the Autobots, who would then guide them to the "stop my dimension from being sucked into oblivion" button. Well, maybe not that smoothly. But a little optimism could mean a lot when lives are at stake. If there was one thing that Small Foot would wanted to believe, it was their entire team would make it home in one piece.

As she reflected on their journey, Road Ranger raised a concerned voice. "Guys, my fuel efficiency is dropping way below normal. I think it might be because I'm carrying a *massive army tank on my back."*

Hitched to the back of Road Ranger's truck mode was an unused flatbed trailer that they had "borrowed" from a truck stop along the way, and on it rested Treds, his tank mode concealed by a tarp spread over the vehicle. "Treds, did you think of picking a vehicle mode that's actually street legal in this country? You know, practicality. Hey, you awake?"

"…Fair question. Let me tell you my idea of practical." Treds answered after a short pause. He might have been dozing off. "Practical is a 90 mm anti-air cannon, because it keeps you alive. As security officer, I'm the one who has to keep this team safe. I bet trucks and compact cars get great mileage, but your vehicle mode weaponry isn't going to put a scratch on the Decepticons of this world. …By the way, I wasn't sleeping."

"You know, bickering expends energy too. It's healthier on your optics and nerves to pull off the *r'mevran* for a couple cycles and recharge a little." Rest-Q's vocalizers clicked and buzzed around the glitch in his speech processors.

Road Ranger didn't take much convincing. "Sounds good to me, doc. It'd be great if we make it through without seeing combat, but I don't want to go up against any Decepticon big bads with my energy half-empty."

"The Buggyman needs no refueling, but would welcome the chance to examine the indigenous insects and arachnids. Shall we stretch our wings a bit?"

Small Foot, Buggyman, Road Ranger, Treds, and Rest-Q pulled off the main road toward a pasture of farmland. Now under cover of night, it was unlikely that they would attract attention from humans or other life forms. They positioned their vehicle modes behind a barn, and prepared to initiate auto-maintenance.

As Small Foot looked around at the vast, silent fields behind them, there was something about

it that strangely reminded her of home. Of course there was no vegetation or agriculture on the metallic world of Gobotron, but she had been brought online and spent her young life in an energy mining region that was far from the cities torn by civil war. She thought that if she had been born on Earth, a place like this might have been her home.

"You like it here too, don't you?" Road Ranger seemed to have almost read her mind. After the number of missions they had been on together, they were practically siblings. "Funny, isn't it? Back on Gobotron, I was always ready for more action. But here? There's something kind of soothing about Earth. Not that we've got the time to enjoy it."

"No, I totally get it." Small Foot usually would've been the last person to kick back and enjoy the scenery, but Road Ranger didn't seem fazed at all.

"The humans, the plants… all the organic life here. There's something… harmonious, you know? This world is closer to us than…"

"Ranger, you OK?"

Road Ranger's voice had trailed off momentarily. "Yeah, sorry. Guess I wore myself out lugging our heavy artillery here around."

Rest-Q transformed from automobile into robot mode, and extended his left hand. "Why don't you let me do a diagnostic *scju-glarp* on you, just in case? Uh, do a check, I mean."

The medic's hand emitted a soft humming noise. A moment later a puzzled expression formed on his face. "Hmm. Wonder when that happened."

"Should I be worried, Doc?" Rest-Q gestured toward the ground.

"Take a look at that. You've just got a *lyptsnarg*. A *ly*… Ah, you're dribbling." Beneath Road Ranger, a sprinkling of fuel dotted the earth.

"It's no surprise you were feeling worn out. You've got a puncture in your auxiliary fuel tank. Something must've nicked you on the road."

"See? I told you I'm not *that* heavy," Treds muttered.

Rest-Q's right hand glowed with light, accelerating Road Ranger's auto-regeneration functions. "Your regen would have fixed it up anyway, but that should do it. Just take it easy for a little while until you get your fuel levels back up."

Small Foot chimed in encouragingly. “Hey, I don’t mind doing some heavy lifting! You can hitch the trailer up to me and I’ll pull it through Potato or wherever!”

“Thanks, Foot. But just give me a couple cycles here and I’ll be good to go. And Rest-Q, I owe you one! Talk about convenient timing to have a medic!”

A wave of Rest-Q’s special hand deflected all praise. “Nah, just doing my job. You fight, I fix!”

Buggyman, on the other hand, wasn’t doing anything except sitting silently, with his optics focused on a dark patch of forest off to their west. Convenient timing, indeed…

Energy reserve: 35% Prioritize energy conservation. Detection systems enabled. Targets acquired. Status: Self-repair. Recommendation: current initiation of contact.

Before Small Foot’s eyes swam the abyss. It was not an object, but an absence of all things that seemed to distort and draw in the light around it like a black hole. But deep within it, she felt something conscious: malice, and hunger. It was an entity, ceaselessly devouring space itself and leaving nothingness in its wake. Mired within it, she saw her friends and allies, but somehow different than she had last seen them. Their faces were familiar, but like Small Foot’s team, they had changed themselves to embark upon new journeys. She was seeing the slow extinction of not just her people, but their possible future. All that was and would be for them teetered on the verge of nothingness.

And there, among them was Leader-1. The paragon of peace and diplomacy who she knew would do anything to protect the lives of the people of Gobotron. The one whose words had inspired her to travel to Gobotolis; to take up arms and fight for the safety of their world. Her actions, often cautioned as being brash, had always been motivated by a personal admiration she held for the leader. When no one else could, she had to be the one that would protect him. Yet now, along with all other residents of their universe, he was drifting away before her very eyes.

There was still something she could do. Something she needed to tell him. What was it? She searched among the darkness for the words that could save her leader. But when she opened her lips, her voice was met by a cacophony of noise and distortion. No words would reach his audio receptors. There seemed to be nothing she could do but watch from afar as the end drew near.

Suddenly, a rift split through the pitch blackness. It spread and curled until its true shape became visible: it was a grinning maw. She had thought that she was looking into the darkness, but she had been wrong. It was that one that had been watching her.

A sharp gasp pierced the air as Small Foot awoke and refocused her optic sensors on the

surroundings. Her teammates were slumbering peacefully in maintenance mode, unaware of the terrifying vision that had seemed so real just a moment ago. She breathed a sigh of relief… until she noticed something unnerving: Once again, they were a member short. Buggyman was nowhere to be seen. He had said something before about wanting to observe the animals of this region, but a little voice told Small Foot that there might be more to it than that.

Converting to truck mode, Small Foot used the UV sensors in her headlights to detect the tire tracks leading away from their camp, off into the darkness. As she followed, a different sort of sensor whispered to her that she was about to discover something important… it was the same one that told her when she needed to take matters into her own hands, and do what would likely earn her the anger of her superiors. But she couldn't help herself, because the whisper had become a call, and her sense of adventure was telling her that she was hot on the trail. She was getting closer… to something.

A wave of excitement swept through Small Foot and the darkness before her seemed to be briefly illuminated by a warm glow, as though responding to her determination. Was it her imagination? When the sky was again filled with a burst of light, her thermal sensors confirmed that this was no illusion. The ball of light continued to radiate heat, and although she couldn't see it clearly, the warmth that flowed through her indicated that the "something" was drawing closer. It was a somehow reassuring sensation, and couldn't have felt more different than the chilling numbness of the creature she had witnessed in her dream.

"Hello." A voice entered her mind. Like the light surrounding her, it was calm and reassuring, and although she couldn't quite place it, it seemed as if it might have been the voice of an old friend.

"…Hello?"

"Don't be afraid. I've been searching for you."

"Who… Who are you?"

"I'm just like you. I'm all by myself, on a journey to help my friends." The words sparked a memory in her, as if there was something she'd nearly forgotten.

"My friends! That's right… I'm not alone! Path Finder and Road Ranger…. They'll be waiting for me. I need to get back to them."

"Then, shall we go together?"

No sooner had she responded in thought than the light grew even brighter, causing her to

momentarily shut her optics. The aura enveloped her with radiant warmth, and for just a moment, she saw a vision of home. This wasn't the home from her memories, but for some reason it felt just as fond and nostalgic. Her optics couldn't process the data she was receiving, yet intuitively she knew: this was what it's like to be within a star.

Where she existed now, all the beings were interconnected, and all at harmony. There was no civil war, no greed or avarice. This civilization shared an evolution that was unique in the galaxy. Just as she reflected that this sensation seemed too pure to go uncorrupted, the shared consciousness dimmed, and the radiance around her began to fade away. She couldn't tell whether it was occurring over minutes or millennia, but little by little the light faded until it was only a glimmer in the void surrounded by the parasitic blackness that she had experienced before. These beings were truly the same as her own people. Some terrible force had left them with only a tiny flicker of hope, with extinction drawing nearer and nearer.

With this realization, the light vanished entirely, and Small Foot opened her eyes. She was back at their camp, where the other Gobots were safely gathered. It was no different then when she had been startled awake earlier, and her internal clock displayed that only a brief time had passed. Had the growth and downfall of the beings that she had witnessed all been a dream? Or a dream within a dream? But she couldn't let her mind dwell on curiosity. Road Ranger was almost fully recharged, and they were still only halfway to their initial destination. The sun would be rising soon.

Several miles from the other Gobots, Buggyman stood among a patch of trees, alone except for his hovering drone. Had any of his teammates seen him there, seemingly engaged in a one-sided conversation with his pet, they would have assumed this to just be more of his usual bizarre behavior. His voice, however, carried a calm and even tone which seemed to be that of a different person entirely.

"Correct. Our sleeper is already in place."

"It had to be here, in this span of several miles of land. Their route had been calculated to intersect with it, as had the timing of Road Ranger's minor 'accident.'"

"When I activate the signal, the fly will eliminate the hawk. The Oregon emplacement will be under our control."

Buggyman's team members and the citizens of Gobotron believed that dimensional instability had rendered interstellar communication impossible. However, the metallic content of the soil in this region of Idaho amplified the transmission beacon of his drone, allowing Buggyman to open a transmission with their homeworld.

“No, none of them suspect anything. They’re ignorant, and completely absorbed in their own insecurities. Subject Two has a typical inferiority complex for which he overcompensates. Subject Three is impulsive, and resists authority. They can be easily broken.”

As Buggyman described the weaknesses of each of his teammates, his image was being transmitted clearly onto the monitor of a laboratory deep below the surface of Gobotron. “If we cannot complete the mission within three solar cycles, I will prepare for your arrival.”

In the laboratory, a gray, winged mechanoid nodded his head. He was partially obscured by the shadow of a great, hulking form that was suspended in a transparent tank in the center of the room. “Very good. My Super Voyager body has been readied for the purge. And you’re sure that *you’re* ready, Buggyman?”

“Of course, sir. If we can’t save Gobotron, I’ll see that the poison from my turboworms eliminates all seven of them. As you’ve ordered, the slate will be wiped clean.”
A sinister grin spread across the robot’s face. For too long, he had been overshadowed by his rival. But Cy-Kill had grown complacent and soft. A leader in position alone. The robot knew that this impending cataclysm could be his chance to exact vengeance after interminable years of humiliation.

“You do so, Buggyman. If we lose Gobotron, it will not mean the end of our race. We will simply start again from zero.” With these words, he transformed into his jet mode, and flew away through a tunnel behind him. The transmission concluded.

DAY 2

Just before the light of morning beckoned the five travelers back onto the quiet country road, they had been met with an encouraging sign: a signal transmitted from Path Finder indicating that she, Bad Boy, and Man-O-War were in the proximity of the Autobot Ironworks base. Despite their first apprehensions, it appeared that the aerial group had managed to reach the target unimpeded. The next contact they would receive would mean that Path Finder had made contact with the Autobots, and that their squad was safe to proceed.

As Small Foot followed her team along the quiet roads, an Earth vehicle occasionally passing by, she hoped to herself that the several hours of travel ahead of them would continue as

uneventfully... when her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a wildly revving motor from far behind them. It was still separated by more than a mile, but another vehicle was approaching them at harrowing speed. Treds, already facing backward on the truck bed towed by Road Ranger, focused his tank mode targeting system to get a better look.

“This guy’s coming in way too fast. It’s a red sports car. I can almost get a bead on him...” Road Ranger couldn’t get a look at the unknown vehicle, but he kept his calm.

“Hold up there, big gun. It might just be an Earth vehicle with a case of... what do they say? Road rage?”

As the approaching car drew nearer, Small Foot shifted her vehicle mode optics to get a better look. It was just close enough for her to spot the insignia on its hood. “That’s... not an Earth vehicle! It’s an Autobot!”

She could see that the hood of the sleek sports car was decorated with an elaborate crest of flames and a clearly Autobot insignia at its center, although one of a darker color than she was familiar with.

“If Path Finder made it to the *b’hin-draehv*, the Autobots might have sent out a vanguard to escort us?” Rest-Q suggested hopefully.

Suddenly, Small Foot recalled the dossier she had studied on the Autobots of this world. “Red sports car... flames... I’ve heard of this guy! Yeah, Hot Rod! He’s supposed to be one of the most famous Autobot heroes on Earth!”

“‘Hot Rod,’ huh. ‘Bot must not be famous for his creativity...” Treds kept a steady eye on the vehicle, now less than a minute from overtaking them.

Buggyman interjected tensely: “Do not transform. Do not address the vehicle. It should be unaware of our identities.”

“If this is one of the head honchos of the Autobots, our jobs just got a whole lot easier. What’s the problem?” asked Road Ranger quizzically.

“*Listen* to me, Guardian, unless you desire to be shot full of more holes than a beehive. That is no Autobot of this world.”

Almost upon them, the red sports car showed no signs of decreasing its speed. At this pace, it was seconds away from colliding with Small Foot, its engines roaring as it careened down the open road. Was it aware of their secret? Who would transform first? The safety of their mission

hinged on this game of chicken.

Just as it seemed that Small Foot would be driven off the road, the vehicle transformed, but not into a robot. A pair of wings slid out from below its doors, and with an even greater boost of speed it left the ground and soared above them, a voice calling from within the car as it passed.

“Plodding Earth-crawlers! I’m in too much of a hurry to be sharing the road with the likes of you!” As it gained altitude, the vehicle veered away from the roads and over the open fields, speeding into the distance.

“A flying car, huh... didn’t know that was a thing on this Earth,” said Road Ranger bemusedly. Small Foot was stunned. “But... I was sure it was an Autobot... Buggyman, why did you tell us to hold back?”

“You Guardians... you don’t even realize you’re moths dancing perilously before the flame.” Buggyman explained, as if he was addressing not particularly intelligent children.
“If that was an Autobot, it was not one of this world. As you’re no doubt aware, the Buggyman’s adorable drone R-Navi can scan the basic functions of lifeforms around us. Unlike the Transformers on which we’ve been informed, that being contained no “spark,” the life core these Autobots carry.

“So, what... You’re saying it was some kind of drone, like that bug of yours?”

Buggyman hissed, baring his teeth.“Ksss... Please, do not compare that graceless creature to Buggyman’s dear pet! That energy signature was something else entirely... perhaps an alien, like ourselves.”

“And since we don’t have Stfloerks... Erm, we’re not built like Transformers either, we just seemed like Earth vehicles to it?” Rest-Q seemed to understand Buggyman’s reasoning.

“It seems that although your speech processor is buggy, your brain functions properly.”

“I could’ve taken him. One guy? I had a clear shot, an energy blast aimed right at the middle of his purple Autobot badge,” muttered Treds a little disappointedly.

“Tell me, could you have defeated six of them?”

“Wait! You’re kidding me...!” blurted Road Ranger, suddenly astounded. “Was it that guy?! What’s his name, Chess? Backgammon? Your friend, that red sports car that combines with all those other guys into a giant board game-themed robot?”

“It was not Tic-Tac, you numbskull! Whatever it was, R-Navi detected the faint signatures

of several more of them in the vicinity. Buggyman suggests we avoid unnecessary complications...”

Finally, something Small Foot and the Renegade could agree upon. Just a few short hours from their destination, it was imperative that they pushed forward. “I never expected to say this, but... Good call, Buggyman. I guess optimism got the better of me back there. We should probably hit the road before any more of those guys come along...”

Contact with target successful. Internal battery level: 32 percent. Proceed with mission.

A few hours on the road passed uneventfully as the five Gobots progressed toward their location. At their current pace, they would arrive in the vicinity of the Autobots’ Ironworks Base in less than 30 minutes… Among them, only Small Foot seemed ill at ease.

“You know, this hasn’t been a bad little trip!,” said Road Ranger cheerfully. “I hadn’t expected it to be so quiet out here.”

Small Foot hesitated a moment. “…That’s it. Total radio silence. We haven’t gotten anything from the base, and we’ve been in transmission range for hours. After Path Finder arrived, she was supposed to start sending out a tracking signal that would let us pinpoint her location.”

“Buggyman can assure you that my… ah, his navigation is correct! Perhaps she got a case of butterflies in the stomach?”

“As much as I hate to say it, maybe Man-O-War was right about us not just walking right in. Is there a way we can get close to the base without drawing too much attention?”

“Just ask my dear R-Navi!,” continued Buggyman proudly. Her fly’s-eye view detects no movement around the base, but there is a grove of foliage behind it that we can use to approach undetected!”

Ironworks was located several miles from major roads, and the five were no longer in any danger of being found out by humans, but they remained in their vehicle modes as they circled away from the coordinates of the base, arriving at the grove of trees that was located nearby. A large Transformer would have stood out among them, but for the smaller Gobots, it was an ideal cover. Transforming into their robot modes, they crossed a small stream and continued unimpeded until finally the walls of Ironworks were in sight.

“Looks like there’s no welcoming committee. Nothing from Path Finder, either. Do we need try to sneak in?,” asked Road Ranger.

It was just then that a friendly and confident voice rang out from in front of them. “Welcome to the Ironworks Base…”

The team focused their optics, but could detect no presence. “…and to your deaths.”
This time, the voice was from directly behind them, and it was followed by the cacophony of gunfire.

A blurred flurry of super-heated energy danced around them and sparks flew from their bodies as they were struck by several glancing shots. Small Foot had taken a hit to the leg, and another shot had neatly penetrated one of Rest-Q’s hands.

“Well now, we’ve got five rare creatures! Optimus is gonna love addin’ you to his collection!”

An unknown Transformer stood just a few meters away from them, his appearance fairly unremarkable aside from his gaudy orange and gold paintjob. How had he managed to get so close to them? In on hand he held the rifle that had fired the opening salvo.“Better be careful not to shoot you up too much... You’re worth most to him in good condition.”

Still mostly uninjured, Treds held up an arm in protest as he faced the attacker. “Stop it! We’re not spies! We’re on a diplomatic mission!”

Road Ranger continued, holding his side where he had taken a hit. “You work for Optimus Prime? Please, we just need to talk! We’re here looking for help.”

The robot grinned at them, but its lips didn’t move as it spoke. The voice seemed to be coming from the gun itself. “Sorry to tell you you’re lookin’ in the wrong place. I’m the one in charge, here. I’m Nebulon, and this dumb bulk is my assistant, Stepper! We work for Optimus... I’m guessing he’s not the Optimus you’re looking for, though.”

Stepper gestured to the insignia on his chest. It was the same purple Autobot symbol that they had glimpsed earlier, on the red sports car. “So talk all you like! Better make it snappy, though. The next shot I fire is taking out, let’s see... yellow throat, white stomach, green knee, and...”

As Stepper raised Nebulon to map out their next shot, Small Foot spoke softly. “There’s something strange about the sound around him... I think that’s how he snuck up on us.”

Without saying a word, Treds turned his lowered arms slightly, and began curling the fingers on one hand into a fist. One by one, like a pitcher sending a signal. “Three, two, one...”

At the moment he clenched his fists, all the Gobots save Rest-Q raised both arms in front of their bodies and let loose with a concentrated blast of energy at Stepper, which cascaded forth and

enveloped him in a flash of light. Treds had counted on their gun-wielding opponent regarding them as unarmed and not knowing that the Gobots' most versatile weapon was one built into their forms.

The flash dissipated and Stepper's form came back into view... unharmed and grinning again. Tiny sparks and ripples of energy coursed through the surface of his armor, but he had sustained no damage.

"Hand lasers! That's your big trick, eh?" Nebulon spoke, unfazed. "Stepper's handsome colors aren't just for show, you know! This Golnium coating can shake off all kinds of energy attacks. So unless you've got anything better, let's get back to me killing you one by one!"

Small Foot looked down the raised barrel of Nebulon, numbly staring death in the face. How could it be that the five of them were thoroughly outmatched by one opponent? All their preparation and training for this journey, and all it took was one assassin getting the drop on them. If she hadn't been so blindly optimistic, maybe—

"Do not give up hope. I will not allow our journey to end so soon." A familiar voice echoed in Small Foot's mind and despite the circumstances, she felt reassured. As Stepper aimed directly at her, Nebulon fired the shot.

Severe danger. Switching from conservation to active mode. Prioritize defense.

It occurred so quickly that it should have been invisible to the optical sensor, but Small Foot saw it as if in slow motion. The blast of energy hovered briefly only inches from her face and then spread into nothingness as, with a warm glimmer, it was absorbed by some unseen wall. Somehow they had seemingly replicated the effect of Stepper's armor.

"My shield will protect us from energy assaults. You must fight using the weapons of this world," stated the same voice.

Stepper's mouth hung dumbly open in amazement."Agh.. Wh... Wha..."

"What?! You can't do that! Only he's supposed to be able to do that!" chattered Nebulon, translating Stepper's mumbling into words. With his left hand, Stepper reached for his back, grabbing the stock of what appeared to be a spare weapon. "That's no fun! Well, guess we do this the old-fashioned way..."

In an instant of understanding, Small Foot realized the only way to emerge alive. "Energy blasts won't even scratch him. We need hard ammo!"

Treds peered at her for just one second, before his eyes widened with comprehension. "Finally,

it's my turn!"

The tank cannon from his vehicle mode would be just as useful in robot mode, and thanks to the synthetic properties of their regeneration, it was now also loaded with several bullets. "I may be a little late to work, but I won't let nobody say I don't do my job!"
Aiming to subdue the enemy, Treds let loose with a single, thunderous cannon blast at Stepper's midsection.

With a terrified expression, Stepper moved reflexively to shield himself, bringing his right hand up to his midsection. "Wha—No, don't..!"

Treds's single shot proved to be disastrously effective, although not in the way he had intended. It struck Nebulon with full force, causing a smaller explosion that instantly blew the gun into a scatter of parts, consuming Stepper's hand with it as it sent him sprawling.

The confident smirk on Treds's face was immediately replaced by an open-mouthed expression of disbelief. He looked more horrified than even Stepper, who winced in pain as he writhed on the ground.
"I... By the Engineer... That little organic thing... I wasn't aiming for him!"

He remained frozen in place as Stepper began to inch along the ground. Only Road Ranger noticed that he was moving toward his extra blaster, which had been thrown against a tree a few meters away.

"Treds! Keep it together, here! You've gotta be a man!" Road Ranger shouted as he moved his wounded body to scoop up the gun before Stepper could reach it. He snatched the weapon off the ground, and seeing his defeat sealed, Stepper looked at Road Ranger with exhaustion.

"Yes... You destroyed... my friend... You have... my weapon." Stepper spoke from his own mouth, with a soft voice barely louder than a mumble. "I lost. So... do it. Be... a man."

As Road Ranger stood pointing Stepper's own gun at him, his eyes flashed with rage at these words. Small Foot saw the glare on his face. "Hold on, RR! Don't do it!"

It was as if Road Ranger didn't even hear her. He gripped Stepper's gun in both hands, and raised it. "I will. Because, I am one."

Road Ranger brought the weapon crashing down over his knee, shattering it into splinters. With a grimace, he struck Stepper hard across the face. "Let me tell you, Stepper, what it means to 'be a man.' It's a human expression. I've spent some time with humans and they're courageous. They're capable of compassion, even to opponents. What isn't a man is a dirty killer who revels in unprovoked violence. That's what you are and you make me sick."

Treds still had an uneasy expression on his face. “A killer... that’s right...”

“Road Ranger, Treds... you ought to look at this...” Rest-Q had been glancing around at the ground, focused on the scattered debris.
“Neither of you killed anyone. These parts... it’s a Gregevor. I mean, it’s just a normal gun.”

“I didn’t?! Are you sure?” asked Treds, sounding almost delighted. Buggy Man chuckled.

“Guardians... so naïve. Did only Buggy Man realize that this supposed ‘partner’ was a mere illusion of ventriloquism? I did not wish to provoke the assassin’s ire by confronting his ruse, but the charade was as plainly obvious as a turboworm infestation!”

“I thought the sound was acting strangely around him! It must have been those things on his shoulders,” deduced Small Foot. “They weren’t just for cancelling sound when he snuck up... He’d been redirecting sound waves to fool us this whole time! But... why?”

“Because that’s... who *I* am. Who I *was*. You’re the... first ones to... see through it. Perceptive. But... it’s too late. For you.”

“Oh, yeah?” asked Road Ranger confidently. “Afraid I don’t catch your drift.”

“You will. Or, he’ll catch—”

“Don’t move. Not even an inch...” A stern voice cautioned them, revealing an unknown red Transformer. In his arms was an enormous rifle, and he had them squarely in the crosshairs.

TO BE CONTINUED...