



# EUGENESIS

JAMES ROBERTS

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FOR MY SON, WILLIAM

# EUGENESIS

BY JAMES ROBERTS

## PROLOGUE

**Eugenesis** (*n.*) The quality or condition of having strong reproductive powers; generation with full fertility between different species or races, specifically between hybrids of the first generation.

In the years to come, when the Changeover had taken place (or ‘the Turnaround’ or ‘the Descent’, or ‘the Ascent’ or ‘the Reckoning’, or whichever sanitised, Ministry-approved epigram was doing the rounds that week), when the Great Scaledown and the unstoppable rise of the Neogens had led to a new population of Beast Warriors, and when a thirst for answers and a near-hysterical desire to dispel the shadow of Reductionism had forced Maximal scholars to retrace their dark ancestral steps, it would be decided that the Beginning of the End started on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2012 – and it started with a whimper, not a bang.

And here the trees and I know their gnarled surface, water and I feel its taste. These scents of grass and stars at night, certain evenings when the heart relaxes – how shall I negate this world whose power and strength

I feel? Yet all the knowledge on earth will give me nothing to assure me that this world is mine. You describe it to me and you teach me to classify it. You enumerate its laws and in my thirst for knowledge I admit that they are true. You take apart its mechanism and my hope increases. At the final stage you teach me that this wondrous and multi-coloured universe can be reduced to an atom and that the atom itself can be reduced to an electron. All this is good and I wait for you to continue. But you tell me of an invisible planetary system in which electrons gravitate around a nucleus. You explain the world to me with an image. I realise then that you have been reduced to poetry: I shall never know.

*Albert Camus*  
*'The Myth of Sisyphus'*

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*The Primal Pentateuch Vrsn 2.0 (First Church translation)*

PART ONE

*The Chaos of Warm Things*

‘Time to lock and drop, people. Suction clamps primed for quick release. Skimming for low turbulence. You two okay down there?’

Kaal pulled the mouthpiece nearer his lips. ‘Ready when you are, Aybe. Be gentle with us.’

‘Hey, you won’t even know I’ve let you go.’

The aqua-shuttle brushed sea salt into its flame jets as it clipped another wave. Stuffed inside the cockpit was Aybe B’rok, the leader of the Outer Ridge exploration team; he grappled with parallel controls and belly thrusters as he prepared to release the deep sea pod. He peered through the viewscreen’s water-whirls and splatter-patterns, but there was no need to search for a drop-off point: Aquaria’s entire surface was covered in liquid.

Looking at the monitor screen he saw his two crewmates, Kaal Sted and Plyn Minsk, squeeze into bulky seats and nod at the vid-cam. He wished he were down there with them, ready for the plunge. Sure, Aquaria had been declared biologically lifeless and structurally unsound for years, but that was the attraction: a lifetime of gorgeous descent, ocean-wrapped and microcosmic, deafened by pressure. Not for the first time, he wished he were younger; after the third lifecycle, the Patriarchs were reluctant to send you on dangerous missions. You were saddled with stick-work and navigation while the deep-sea teams had all the fun.

Exploration teams from neighbouring star systems had been combing this sector of space for the best part of four years, assimilating everything from asteroid belts and ice moons to hyper-globes and birth stars. Geomarines and Sci-Squads hopped from rock to rock looking for ‘trace-echoes’ and ‘telltale signs’. They braved contrastorms and nanoclimates, solar flares and collapsing evo-chains – just to be sure. And as they worked their way patiently down the Itinerary, ticking off every planet boasting ‘a mature ecosystem capable of supporting sub-neutered bio-mechanicals or hybridised link species’, many forgot exactly what they were looking for. Besides, deep down, no one wanted to find anything.

It was all about security.

Even before the time storm in 2009, the Patriarchs were discussing ways to ensure that the plans described in the Canister never came to fruition. And while certain militarised races could undoubtedly protect themselves (Empire worlds, for example, were crossed off the list immediately), the younger and more vulnerable civilisations were prime targets. And so the Canister’s message was translated into a billion dialects and neural codes, looped, and then re-beamed across the galactic sector. Specialised tracking teams

worked through its planetary inventory, cataloguing and surveying, confident that the further down the list, the less likely the chance of contact.

Protometallic messian spheres like Nithium, Torrene and Yerril were the most desirable targets, and yet every body-drop had ended with a resounding ‘clean’. So after three years checking the Top 200 it was time to sift through the dregs – the ruinous globes that didn’t quite make the grade.

Aquaria didn’t even make the Top 200: it was buried in appendix six (‘Contingency’) under weightier and more probable candidates. It wasn’t even metallic, or a half-bred Cyberformed leftover. It was just... there. And so no one could quite work out why transwarp traces had been detected across its orbital belt, or why a cargo ship had been wing-clipped as it had crossed the dark side of its third moon.

Aybe steadied the craft as hail started to scab the viewscreen. ‘It’s getting prickly up here. I’ll make the orbital run and retrace for pick-up, okay? See you in forty.’ He released the final set of holding clamps and the deep sea pod slipped from the aquashuttle’s fuselage.

Kaal swept his hand across the control console as the pod sank underwater. A belt of multi-layered plexiglass curved around the pod’s waist. A single green bulb driven tight into the domed ceiling glazed every instrument with an emerald sheen. Directional boosters battled against the current and warning lights faded as the pod stabilised.

‘Let’s see what’s down here,’ said Plyn, activating the searchlights. ‘No sign of movement on a local scale. Take a sample, Kaal.’

Kaal fiddled with the miniaturised airlock and unpacked a seawater sample. ‘I know we can withstand the pressure,’ he whispered, ‘but do you ever get the feeling that the ocean is trying to force its way inside?’

‘The ocean is trying to force its way inside – or are you just trying to be poetic?’

‘Forget it. You want to hear the tox report?’

‘What’ve you got?’

‘The planet’s covered in *aqua fortis*, a corrosive liquid that breaks down certain metals – anything in the GH3, 7 or 8 tables. Submersion can trigger contact decay or web fractures.’

‘I take it we’re safe in here?’

‘I think so. The pod’s made from a GH composite.’

Plyn checked his console. ‘Ten thousand metres, Kaal – deepest we’ve dropped in a long time. It feels like the walls are gonna buckle. Tin-can time, eh?’

‘Perhaps we should turn back. I mean look at the tox report – you think they’re going to choose *this* place?’

‘Who knows? Aquaria’s on the list.’

‘Yeah, but so is Earth. I think the Patriarchs are reading it all wrong.’ He pawed the viewscreen. ‘Crank up the beams, will you? I can’t see a thing. What’s the seabed like?’

The search beams swelled to maximum glare. ‘Nothing special. A few minor protrusions, but we’re looking at a regular pantrinsic plateau. I suggest we... ah.’

‘What? *What?*’

‘The sonar’s picking up some irregularities... Looks like an abyss, about two thousand metres across. Indeterminate depth. Suggest we—’

‘No.’

‘—go further down. Come on, Kaal, we’ll descend as far as the primary fuel blocks allow, right? We’ll drop-drift if we have to.’

Kaal fiddled with his mouthpiece and stared outside. The beams were bruising the lip of the canyon, tripping over cracks and cavities. ‘I really don’t see the point. Let’s buzz Aybe and give him the all clear. We can be back on Hybridia by daybreak.’

‘15,000 metres. Where’s your sense of adventure?’

The pod dropped into the abyss, into suction streams and tidal threads.

‘How far do you want to take this, Plyn?’ Kaal’s knuckles were pale with tension. ‘Until we clip an outcrop? Until the lights burn out and we’re diving blind?’ He craned his neck to get a response. ‘Are you listening to me?’

Plyn was still staring outside. ‘Did you see that? Just then – the cliff changed colour.’

Kaal followed the search beams. ‘That’s odd – this part’s made of metal. Hmm... Perhaps Aquaria is techno-organic. That would explain why they’re interested.’ He tilted the pod closer to the walls of the



abyss. 'That's not biomes - something's built into the cliff.' The beams picked out rigid troughs and fuse patterns, a fat vein of sealant and another slab of rock.

'Kaal? There's something on the radar. Something's coming towards us.'

'Impossible.'

'Look at my face and tell me I'm lying. Take us up, Kaal!'

The propulsion jets rolled bubbles across the viewscreen as the pod grudgingly changed direction.

The radar repeated its one shrill syllable.

'It's coming after us!' Plyn screamed. 'It's picking up speed!'

The darkness outside seemed to split into moving shapes, and the blackest lunged towards the pod. Search beams danced across an open mouth, sidestepping molars and incisors, pistons and blade-beds. Kaal screamed, Plyn screamed, and the pod exploded between snapping jaws.

He landed badly, face-first and limb-locked, his elbows kicking up sparks as they hit the ground. For a moment he wondered whether he was still on Junk, whether Unicron's time portal had been nothing more than a jumping hoop. But no - there was no heat, no noise, and neither Cyclonus nor Scourge were anywhere to be seen.

Death's Head lay face down, waiting for the stretch and tug of temporal dislocation to settle. Damage sensors whispered sweet nothings in his ear, rhapsodising about severed ternums and shattered solenoids - a eulogy to pain and inner waste. His smouldering cloak flapped angrily in the wind; he listened to that instead, then rolled onto his back and waited for internal repairs to kick in.

The sky, too, was busy re-stitching itself, and quickly smoothed itself down. In seconds, all trace of his arrival had been erased. He sat up and straightened a buckled jaw-spike, happy that the wave of system-sickness had passed.

'No wonder Cyclonus and Scourge aren't here,' he said into a microphone in his thumb. 'Time travelling without due care and attention is dangerous enough - entering the chrono-crossroads propelled by a five-megaton explosion is damn near suicidal. Given their mode of departure, my targets could be anywhere and anywhen. Waste of time trying to track them down.' He snuffed a flame that was nibbling at the hem of his cloak. 'In light of this, mission 534 is closed indefinitely.'

He stood up and looked around. In front of him, a carapace of solar panels stretched towards the horizon, dappled by midday light. 'No idea where I am, but tech-level is pushing grade seven. Possibly an Empire world, judging by its pure metallic composition and apparent lack of inhabitants - maybe a Dominator outpost.' He looked in the opposite direction and brought his thumb to his mouth. 'Scratch that. I'm standing on Hybridia, on the Outer Ridge.'

The view had changed: the solar panels had been replaced by hills and valleys, by bush and bracken and freshwater lakes. Beyond a swaying tree line was a silver metropolis, clad in ivy.

'Make that tech ten, maybe higher. Don't know what year it is yet.'

He closed his personal log and rifled among the debris, all thoughts of his last hit forgotten. The Hybridians were rich. They were the most prosperous traders in the galaxy, in fact, with enough capital to purchase entire civilisations. He knew of freelance peacekeepers who had retired after being hired by them, although such lucrative contracts only went to the very best. Universally renowned peacekeepers (like Abslom, Fett and the legendary Weavers) were offered the majority of Hybridian work, usually because it was so dangerous. A Hybridian payoff was an endorsement, an advert. If you didn't want to give up the game, you were guaranteed work for life.

He'd never been offered work by the Hybridians. A contract had passed under his nose in 2007, but before anything was signed a rival mercenary had blown the whistle about the Cybertronians, the time jumping and the 'arm incident'. (He wondered if he'd ever live it down.)

He found his shield and hammered out a dent, admiring the Elpasian handicraft. Blotches of colour suddenly appeared on his forearms, and he blinked at a disc of light a few hundred metres above his head. He sketched the outline of a shuttlecraft, silent enough to crouch without sound (even the nearby trees were unruffled by its presence). 'Tech 12,' he said in awe, and then a voice trickled down from the heavens.

'Death's Head. We want to make you an offer.'

Rewind sat with his arms on the windowsill and stared outside. Whenever he looked across Autobot City's sun-bruised vistas he was reminded how unlucky he was to work in Recycling, halfway between street level and the underground bunkers.

The street outside was lined with poplars, planted by Hound to mark the passing of a year in which the Decepticons had kept well away. They'd not launched any sort of attack on Earth since December 2011, making this winter the quietest on record.

He pulled away from the dust and sunlight and wheeled his chair towards the ATI screen. He didn't know why Blaster had installed the 'revolutionary' ATI system in the Recycling Room, but his superior officer was always droning on about the Comms Level needing an extension. Perhaps he'd put Hound's miracle machine in here to make a point.

*Automatic Tracking and Identification:* 'It will change the way we live our lives,' Ultra Magnus had gushed, and Rewind knew it was true - he'd only been on scanning duty for three days and he was the most bored he had ever been. For all the City Commander's hyperbole (he always *was* too friendly with Hound), the machine was basically a satellite-linked tagging system capable of pinpointing Autobots programmed with a certain biocode. So it could count heads, crunch statistics and transmit messages - big frikkin' deal. Magnus only liked it because it made his job easier. He didn't have to sit indoors watching LCDs and pining for the sun.

Rewind decided he would rather be back on Level 14, updating the Earth archives and trying to discern the identity of the two 'giant iron men' who had appeared sporadically throughout the last few thousand years. Real work, not this grunt stuff. In the corner of the room, the recycling unit juddered noisily to life, bounced off its base clamps and shuffled from wall to wall.

Balancing his ankles on the lip of the ATI keyboard, he noticed that the recycling hatch was wide open. He balled a slab of waste metal, narrowed his optics, and threw it across the room. It dropped into the recyc unit perfectly, adding another chord to the symphony of crunching metal. Flushed with success, he selected another slab and repeated the process.

Bang on target.

After nineteen consecutive successes he decided to disarm his auto-targeting system and rely solely on good old-fashioned spatial co-ordination. Scrunching up an audaciously small wedge of steel, he leant forward, took careful aim, and threw ball twenty.

It missed by ten metres.

He retrieved the rubbish and returned to his seat for a second attempt, thankful that Eject wasn't around to see his failure. This time the ball bounced off the rim of the recyc unit, skated across the windowsill and landed hard on the ATI's touch-sensitive keypads. His optics widened as the monitor became jumbled with fresh commands:

**SCANNING...**

**WIDE RADIUS SWEEP INITIATED**

'No, no, no - closedown.' He jabbed escape and looked for a killswitch. The ATI was designed to keep track of Transformers within Autobot City - what the hell was a 'wide radius sweep'? A column of shifting digits filled the left side of the monitor and a topographical representation of North America filled the right. Images raced by and the map became more specific.

Once the onscreen environment had dropped to eye-level, it froze. Fresh detail emboldened the wire-frames and sketch-prints, adding colour and contrast.

**EX/000001**

**EX/000002**

**EX/000003**

The digits that slid across the screen meant nothing to him, but the image they captioned could not have been more familiar. Without taking his eyes from the screen, he activated the personal intercom on his chest.

‘Blaster? It’s me. I think you’d better come and see this.’

It had become a routine. A daily pilgrimage.

Every evening, Ultra Magnus would climb eighteen flights of stairs to the top of the Command Tower to stand against its glass walls and survey the City – *his* City.

Today, evening sunlight bounced off the peaks and pinnacles of nearby mountains. Shadows stretched across the deeper recesses of the complex, enveloping alleyways and plateaux. In the far distance the December sun was a brittle red disc, chilled by nightfall.

*His City.*

Over the last eight years, since that summer’s day in 2004 when Optimus Prime had hammered the final plate onto Metroplex’s elaborate coffin, Autobot City: Earth had changed. Once ‘a substantial Terran outpost with energon harvesting capabilities and a tri-modular core unit’ (to quote Wheeljack and Grapple’s brief), it was now a home – a home for the one hundred Autobots under his command. But more than that, it was a microcosm of pre-war Cybertron, an oblique link to an era he could only access second hand, via flickering archive footage and the apocryphal stories of dewy-eyed Golden Aegers. While the war on their homeworld slow-burned towards mutual shutdown, towards blissful genocide, he could stand here and survey this hard-edged, soft-shine utopia, this sanctuary.

And yes of course there was guilt – because deep down, shielded behind logic codes and emotional dampeners, he knew that his army of pro-Earthers and pacifists could maybe make a difference back on Cybertron. Perhaps Thunderclash was right – perhaps they should have been fighting alongside their brethren in Iacon or the Canyons. But the transfer could always wait until tomorrow, until the emergency call-up from Prowl, or the red alert from Rodimus. And until then, he would suppress his conscience, swallow his shame, and remember his responsibility to Earth and its six billion inhabitants; he would pray that this illusion of peace would last just one more day. Besides, he sometimes thought that the War continued by force of momentum alone – after all, how could the Decepticons nurture a will to power that continued to burn after four million years? Perhaps one day – perhaps tomorrow – everything would just stop.

On a normal day he would kill the lights, settle in the observation chair, tilt backwards and stare at the stars. Mapping the smothering folds of space, counting constellations and heavenly bodies, he would be overwhelmed by a sense of perspective. He found it ironic that a Flamed Transformer such as himself, constructed purely for battle, could find solace in such an introspective pastime.

Today, however, was different. Today, he walked past the obs chair and sat behind his empty desk. Everything was about to change.

He’d heard the news this morning. It had haunted him all day. Tired of bearing the brunt of such a bombshell, he had decided to tell someone else – a friend, a clear-thinker who could offer some perspective.

Wheeljack stepped out of the vacuum lift and nodded hello. A tool-belt looped his thigh and an electron microscope hung between his fingers like a cigar. The Chief Mechanical Engineer grabbed the visitor’s chair and folded his arms.

‘Hi. What did you want?’

‘Thanks for coming up here, Wheeljack. How are things?’

‘Oh, you know. The usual ups and downs.’

‘What have you done there?’

Wheeljack looked at the scar on his chest plate. ‘My new acid pellets were a touch too acidic. My own fault, of course.’

‘You should have Fixit patch you up.’

‘No, I don’t want to bother the little guy – not when he’s got the medi-bay inspection to worry about.’

Ultra Magnus thought of the City’s resident Micromaster hurrying through empty wards in preparation for Ratchet’s inspection. He’d asked the Autobots’ Chief Medical Officer to inspect their

facilities sixty days ago, prompted by Fixit's hard work updating their rudimentary medical wing. A reasonable request, but High Command was against staff leaving Autobot Medical Centre 1 for any length of time (High Command was against a lot of things nowadays). In the end he'd been forced to make a personal entreaty to Rodimus before Ratchet's temporary leave was sanctioned. And once Rodimus had said yes, the questions had begun, and Magnus had found himself giving details of resources, long-term plans and the weekly energon harvest/burn ratio.

'Ratchet and Mirage are due to arrive any minute now,' said Magnus.

'I didn't know Mirage was coming. What does he want with an empty medi-bay?'

Magnus stood up and stared outside. On the eastern ridge of the City he saw Bluestreak and Trailbreaker testing out Wheeljack's new supertread tyres; half a mile away, Skydive and Slingshot were taxiing down a runway; and on the street directly below, Rewind's face was pressed against a Demerara pane. A moment later the Archivist was gone, replaced by a thin rectangle of light.

'I only heard about Mirage's visit this morning,' Magnus said slowly. 'Tell me, Wheeljack, have you heard any rumours lately?'

'Bluestreak's the person to speak to about rumours. I'm too busy.' Wheeljack stood up, realising his commander was not returning to the desk. 'What sort of rumours?'

'I've heard that Autobot City is to come under intense scrutiny. Mirage is travelling here to assess its long-term viability.'

'What does that mean in real terms?'

'In real terms? They might close us down.'

Outside, two thousand streetlights flickered into life.

'Do you have any proof of High Command's intentions?'

'Some time ago, Rodimus asked me how I'd feel about "redistributing manpower." Last month he asked me about downsizing.'

'We can't downsize! What about Metroplex?'

'A lot of Autobots want to see Metroplex transferred to Iacon, and with Galvatron consolidating his grip on Cybertron, High Command can mount a good argument for relocation.'

'Sounds like a foregone conclusion to me. Mirage's visit is just a rubber stamp job.'

'Rodimus says it's been a year since Deathsaurus attacked. There's no enemy to fight anymore: they're all on Cybertron.'

'Yeah, but if we pack up and leave the Decepticons will launch an attack! We're here as a deterrent, to stop them sucking Earth dry.'

'And there we have the other bone of contention: resources. Thunderclash thinks that the energy invested in running a city this size could be put to better use back home.' Ultra Magnus looked at the microscope rolling over Wheeljack's knuckles. 'Prowl can't see the logic in posting a hundred troops on a planet that for whatever reason is suddenly beneath the Decepticons' notice. At the very least, I'm going to lose 75% of my men.'

'And then they'll say the City is too big for us. We can't win. Are you sure it's not just a simple case of jealousy? High Command is bitter because we've got a city while they're holed up in the Archives Centre?' He waved away Magnus' expression. 'Relax, I'm joking. It's just come as a bit of a shock, that's all.'

There was a long pause before Ultra Magnus continued. 'High Command have other concerns too... About the Autobot Space Bridge and the Ark.'

Wheeljack's face darkened at the thought of his two ongoing projects: the burial of the Autobots' ancient spacecraft and his ongoing quest to shut down the volatile warp portal (used less and less since its creation in 1988) in favour of a large-scale transmat link between Cybertron and Earth.

Magnus saw his friend's expression and wished he'd said nothing. 'How is the Space Bridge project going, anyway?'

'It's going okay. I was going to ask High Command for more raw materials. I can just imagine Prowl coming down here with his databoard and... and... dammit, Magnus, it doesn't make sense! A fuel-efficient Space Bridge would be invaluable to us, and yet High Command have discouraged me from the outset! He flung the electron microscope against a windowpane.'

Ultra Magnus stared blankly at the wreckage, unable to think of anything to say. He remembered approving the plans for both the new bridge and the Ark's underground hangar; he remembered the months of backbreaking work it had taken to extend the City downwards, excavating the natural caverns and catacombs that riddled the area, making a massive detour after a near-hysterical Red Alert, on loan from High Command, claimed he had found fault lines in certain no-go areas. He thought of the Ark right now, enveloped in darkness, fastened to a million tonnes of scaffold, sitting on the launch pad, ready for use.

'We won't leave without a fight,' declared Wheeljack, recovering the microscope. 'I'll confront High Command if I have to, even if it means—'

He was interrupted by the buzzing intercom. Blaster's face appeared on the monitor as Ultra Magnus approached, his fists balled with tension: he wasn't in the mood for another impassioned plea to extend the Comms Level. 'What is it, Blaster?'

'I think you'd better get down here ASAP. Rewind's found something... unexpected.'

'On my way. Magnus out.'

The picture was instantly replaced by the head and shoulders of a Powerbot and a cluttered cockpit. 'Commander Magnus, this is Heatwave of the Cybertronian exploration vessel Thunder Raider requesting permission to land.'

While Heatwave was speaking, a familiar figure crept up behind him and mugged at the vidcam. 'And this is Ratchet saying, "let us in."''

Ultra Magnus grinned. 'You're free to land, Thunder Raider. Use the central landing strip.' He looked at Ratchet. 'I'll see you in a moment.'

'I guess this is it, then,' said Wheeljack, slipping the newly repaired microscope into his belt.

Ultra Magnus pressed his forehead against the window and watched Thunder Raider sweep elegantly towards the landing strip. 'I guess we have to be hospitable. If you could meet our guests at the hangar, I'll see you in Blaster's office in five minutes. Turn the lights out before you go.'

Wheeljack watched him disappear down the vacuum lift and wondered why everything was so impermanent. Ever since the outbreak of war, when he'd fled Tene with his apprentice to enlist in the Autobot army, he'd felt homeless. Evacuated from underground bunkers, lying low in moonbases, biding time in volcanoes and orbital hideaways – his life had been a catalogue of displacement. He felt the usual twist of sadness at the thought of abandoning another base.

He pressed a wall pad and let the lights drain from the room. The windowpanes seemed to disintegrate, revealing a vault of stars. He wondered how many more times he would admire the view.

Ratchet and Mirage picked their way down the Thunder Raider's disembarkation ramp to see Bluestreak, Trailbreaker and Hound waving from a balcony.

'It's nice to feel welcomed, eh Mirage?'

'I suppose three out of a hundred isn't bad.'

'Make that four,' said Wheeljack, strolling into the hangar. 'Nice to see you, doc. Hi, Mirage.'

Ratchet shook his friend's hand, one of many human mannerisms that the original crew of the Ark had appropriated over the years. 'It's been a while. Too long.'

'Yeah. We thought you'd forgotten about us.'

'You're always in our thoughts,' said Mirage, looking away.

The planet Cybertron is known throughout the galaxy, but for many different reasons.

Ancient races such as the Guardians and the Nightstalkers can recall its Golden Age, a time when the Cybertronians were regarded by many pre-Ascension races as evolutionary miracles, their name synonymous with culture and intellectual vigour. When news of a civil war spread to nearby quadrants, even the most astute political commentators could not foresee the downfall of an entire race. But what began as a tit-for-tat exchange of proton bombs escalated at alarming speed, eventually claiming the lives of billions.

After a thousand years of combat, prototype rocket thrusters ripped Cybertron from its orbit and sent it on an elliptical voyage through deep space.

No one blinked an eye.

The war continued, louder and harder than ever, and after another thousand years an asteroid belt blocked Cybertron's flight path. A handpicked team of Autobots boarded a spacecraft - The Ark - and set off to clear the way.

They were not seen again for four million years.

From the ashes of the First War rose the Cybertronian Empire, a Decepticon collective determined to fortify the universe against the Dark God Unicron by reformatting planets in Cybertron's image. Biomorphic reproduction - the Transformer equivalent of a Caesarean section - allowed the Empire to repopulate their home planet and spread to other worlds. All organic races were deemed 'sub-sentient' under a new fascist ideology: Technoism. Massive terraforming campaigns created miniature Cybertrons in every quadrant, while Cybertron's leftover population of stragglers and throwbacks were left to fight a parochial war long forgotten by the new Decepticon elite.

In 1992, the planet was rejuvenated in a single stroke. Geologists and theologians debated the cause (divine intervention by Primus via the Last Autobot, or the overflow of previously undetected sub-surface energon reservoirs?), but agreed that their revamped homeworld was but a shadow of its Golden Age counterpart: the repairs were superficial, a layer of cosmetic metal to cover greying scar tissue. Structurally, the planet was still weak and hollow.

The ferocious combat that followed - including large-scale confrontations with the Empire and Unicron - reopened old wounds, and within twenty years the planet had reverted to a state of sweet decay.

After the Autobot/Decepticon massacre of 2008 and Unicron's temporary resurrection in 2010, the planet's population was reduced to thousands. The Autobots became the Resistance, and retreated underground.

By 2012 they had gained a slight foothold in Iacon by converting the subterranean Archives Centre into their new HQ. It had housed details of Iacon's original population - biocodes, datalogs and Matrix indices from Primon onwards - until Trannis had ransacked the city during the Dark Cycles. All censuses were purged, and the final link with the mysterious First Ones was severed.

When Rodimus Prime's Autobots moved in, their only alteration to the original layout had been to amalgamate several office units and create the boardroom, the debriefing chambers, the engineering workshop, the MARB/shuttle hangars and the repair bay. Each Autobot was given his own habitation space (a rare luxury).

Only 40% of the centre was used, leaving a warren of empty offices in the bowels of the complex. The base foundations merged with a stratum of utility ducts, and overflowing mech-waste exacerbated the centre's indigenous damp. Archaic strip-lights split the ceilings in two, their tinted filaments forcing red light into clefts and fibrils.

In his cramped little office, Rodimus Prime stared at his clenched fists and tried to remain calm. Shoulders hunched with tension, he detuned his audios until Thunderclash's voice - all vowels and languid echoes - blurred into a drone. He should have been liaising with the rest of High Command, or working on Project: Reclamation, or trawling through Creationist literature and continuing his exorcism research - but no, he was trapped under a naked bulb, tired and fatigued, listening to his second-in-command.

He watched Thunderclash stride about the room, arms aloft, ranting about the decision to hold a troop inspection in two days' time.

'It takes a special brand of maniac,' the ex-Decepticon moaned, 'to gather our entire Iaconian army in one place, at one time. We might as well send Galvatron an open invitation! And why, in Primus' name, are you holding it outside?'

'You know full well why. This place isn't exactly Subterranea - we're cooped up in these storage rooms. There's no room for a proper congregation of our forces.'

'Nor is there any need.'

'The troops would benefit from a morale boost. An inspection is the perfect opportunity for you, me and the rest of High Command to show that we take an interest - that we're not a just a bunch of Byzantine bastards using them as cannon fodder!' He swept his hand over the desktop clutter. 'Look at this! I've been so preoccupied with hidden snipers and board meetings that I haven't had a chance to mix with my own men!'

‘Oh, I *see*. You’re threatening the entire resistance movement so that you can have a little get together.’

Prime dropped his optic shields and caressed the bridge of his nose. ‘I’m not endangering anybody. Red Alert has been planning the security measures for weeks. He’s okay with it. Prowl is okay with it. Kup’s given me his full support. Mirage, Ratchet, Perceptor – they’re all on board. And the feedback I’ve had from the troops themselves has been overwhelmingly positive. In fact, you seem to be the only one who has a problem.’

Thunderclash leant on the lip of the desk. ‘If worrying about the safety of other Autobots is a “problem” nowadays it’s no wonder we’re losing the war. And speaking of Ratchet and Mirage, why the hell did you commission the Thunder Raider to take them to Earth? Two days ago, in this very room, you said you wanted the Raider to patrol our supply lines!’ He strode to the corner of the office and dragged a fingertip down a monitor, tracing the Autobots’ trade routes. ‘Need I remind you that there are now ten days’ worth of weaponry piling up at Delphi, not to mention the medical supplies that First Aid requested. Siren’s running out of space while patients in AMC1 are running out of energon.’

‘Oh, don’t be so melodramatic. The Thunder Raider will be back in less than an day and Siren’s happy to stockpile our munitions until then.’

‘But why did you let Ratchet go to Earth in the first place? We’ve got, what, thirty, forty Autobots in the medcentre, and now First Aid has to tend to them all by himself. We waste enough time and energy on the City as it is – why compound matters by sending a quarter of High Command on a glorified package holiday?’

‘Now you’re being deliberately blind!’ Rodimus stood up, knocking his chair across the floor. ‘You know my reasons for sending them to the City!’

‘I know Magnus had a word in your ear about Ratchet paying them a visit, but I can think of a dozen Autobots better suited to city inspections than Mirage.’

Rodimus looked at the dents his fingertips were making in his desk. ‘Have you read the report about the Helex incident or not?’

For the first time since storming into the room, Thunderclash paused. ‘What report?’

‘I left the hard copy in your quarters yesterday.’ Rodimus rifled through a mountain of data files as he explained. ‘Yesterday, Mirage, Rev-Tone and Quark were involved in a skirmish with the Decepticons on the Helexian border.’ He held up the disc. ‘Our men were chasing whispers about some new silo base north of Novena. They ran into the Frenzy, Dirge – and Sixshot.’

‘Sixshot?’

The desktop terminal swallowed the disc. ‘I know. We despatch three men on a low-key mission and they’re ambushed by Galvatron’s new golden boy.’ The office vidscreen flared into life, the Autobrand forming centre-screen. ‘This is Kup’s report.’

Thunderclash précised aloud while Rodimus set straight his upturned chair.

‘Rev-Tone taken out by a frag grenade... Quark suffered minor injuries... Frenzy and Dirge eventually overcome...’ His voice trailed off as he reached the heart of the report, and when he reached the end Rodimus was waiting with his arms crossed.

‘Now do you understand?’

‘Mirage had a clear shot at Sixshot and he hesitated?’

‘There you go. It’s not like him to have any qualms about these things, but he has seemed preoccupied lately. I thought a trip to Earth might give him a little peace. Re-evaluating the City might take his mind off anything that’s troubling him.’

Thunderclash shrugged and walked to the door. ‘I don’t know why you’re bothering to launch an official inspection anyway. It’s all rather counterproductive if you ask me – especially when you’ve already made your decision.’ His hand hovered over the release panel. ‘And that’s one thing you and I do agree on – Autobot City is one big waste of resources, and the sooner we recall the freeloaders the better.’

Prime chased Thunderclash into the corridor, determined not to let him have the last word. ‘If you know so much about Autobot City and troop inspections, why don’t *you* take command?’

Thunderclash tapped Prime on the chest. ‘Sorry, but you’re the “Chosen One”. I couldn’t possibly take over with a living, breathing Matrix Bearer around. Besides, I’m grateful to have any authority at all, seeing as how Magnus declined your offer to co-lead here on Cybertron.’

‘So you’re still cut up about that, eh?’ Rodimus raised his voice so that the departing Liege Centuro could hear every word. ‘You’re lucky I let you within leaking distance of High Command! It’s not as if you’re not used to following someone else’s orders – you followed the Liege Maximo for two million years!’

He found himself standing alone in the corridor. The pain inside his chest climbed another notch, stinging the back of his eyes, and he groped the wall for support.

Nightbeat hoisted the metal container onto his new desk and paused, letting the raised voices echo outside the door. He’d heard rumours about the fragile relationship between Rodimus and his second-in-command, about ‘passionate discussions’ and ‘areas of disagreement’. It was one of the many reasons why he’d wanted to stay in the Sonic Canyons.

He paddled through the container’s contents – his accumulative possessions – and looked at his new quarters, unimpressed. The walls were honeycombed with empty shelves, a beached whale of a desk lay in the corner and the one and only vidscreen was frosted like a dead bulb. Worst of all was the lighting, a five-bar gate of seething red tubes that doused everything in a low Soho glow.

No wonder Chromedome’s guided tour had stopped, abruptly, outside the door. He remembered the lettering below the access panel, the arcs and boughs of each character fading like old type: *Outdated Archival Storage*. The words were chillingly appropriate, so much so that he suspected some kind of subtle dig.

He’d arrived at Autobase a few hours before sunrise, when the outside world seemed a marginally less dangerous place – more a graveyard than a war zone. Fastlane and Cloudraker would be back at the Canyons by now. He thought about Delphi’s air-cooled habitation suites, with their almond-white tabletops, their desk lamps and recharge slabs. He shook his head, surprised at the pang of homesickness, and thumbed dirt from the vidscreen.

Across the corridor were Rodimus Prime’s quarters, no doubt as grubby as his own. He was uneasy about the proximity: how was he supposed to get any work done with High Command squabbling outside his door? A rare and humourless smile flitted across his face. Work? He didn’t even know why he was here.

The executive order had reached Delphi a few days ago. He remembered the look on Siren’s face, the exaggerated emptiness of the mirrored foyer, the twilight patterning the parquet as the holo-wall collapsed; most of all, though, he remembered the silence, so alien to the Canyons: the heavy pause, like the lull after a storm when the last raindrop has hit the tarmac. He’d had time to mumble a few goodbyes to the friends he had made over the years – Pincher, Aragon, Swerve, a few of the Micros – and to promise Siren that he’d be back as soon as his mission – whatever it was – had been completed.

So why had he been called up to Iacon?

Even if his new quarters resembled a Decepticon boardroom after an abortive Enclave, he’d still been housed on the executive level: he was now part of the High Command network. He shuddered at the thought of promotion. Placing his magnifying glass on his desk, he made a half-hearted attempt to be positive. Although the majority of his friends were still at Delphi, he knew a few of the Autobots downstairs – people like Red Alert, Kup and Chromedome.

He pulled another item from the container and thought about Chromedome, now the Autobots’ Chief Communications Officer. Perhaps he should speak to him sometime, seeing as they shared some common ground... perhaps it would help put recent events into some kind of perspective. The thought withered before it could take root: opening his fuel-pump to his contemporaries was hardly his style. It was too contrived, too embarrassing. Siren was the only one he could truly talk to, and even then they’d never discussed *that*.

His trinkets and keepsakes looked trivial as he pulled them from the box, but they filled space on his desk and in his head. The strip lights exposed the scratches and imperfections on his hands; they looked like parched riverbeds and reminded him of death.

Many Autobots kept their bodies flawless through touch-ups and re-sprays and lube transfusions. Their torsos would hum like a freshly baked biomorph when in fact all that remained of their pre-war bodysHELLS was a frizz of neural wiring.

He regarded the whole exercise as not just a waste of valuable resources, but as a distasteful reminder of the Transformers’ quest to avoid circuitburn and become immortal. Their mechanical bodies encouraged constant upgrading. Perpetual combat and the cult of survival meant that natural death – the quiet



expiration of the brain module, the morphcore spinning to a standstill, the lifespark falling short of the synapse – was not only becoming unthinkable, but unethical.

If nothing else, the last few years had taught him to appreciate mortality. In deference to the past he had decided to accrue, endure and progress, to collect each scar and contact burn. His palm would hold the print of every stranger's hand; his optics would guard each sibylline pattern of light; his vox-box would catch the scratch of every wordless murmur. He would age; he would weaken; he would slide towards shutdown and let his body mark the descent. If nothing else, the catalogue of flaws would serve as a reminder of his vulnerability, a cracked mirror reflecting the true march of time.

The container was empty and the office nowhere near full, but at least he had trapped an echo of his Delphi quarters. There remained one major difference. He stared at the throbbing gut of the strip light, grasped a plexi-plastic bulb between his thumb and forefinger, and squeezed. A stream of warm yellow shards trickled over the contours of his hand. The second light popped, as did the third, as did the fourth, sucking colour from his shoulders, from his upturned face. He withdrew into the womb of mottled darkness, wondering if anyone cared about such tender vandalism.

Perhaps his relocation to Iacon could be seen as a fresh start.

The thought frightened him: it felt like a betrayal. To make amends, he unclipped his chest plate and pulled a glass orb from delicate, customised grips. He held the transparent sphere as if it were the Matrix itself.

It was too late to start again.

'Sorry about this,' said Wheeljack, pushing himself against the door to the Comms Level and giving an embarrassed laugh. 'It's not usually stuck, you know.'

Ratchet grinned. 'Is there something in there you don't want us to know about, Wheels?'

Instead of taking the vacuum lifts, Mirage had insisted that they 'stroll'. It would enable him, he said, to see how the City had changed since his last visit. Wheeljack had been on edge throughout the journey, and the malfunctioning door was the last straw.

'Right. Okay. Fine. Everyone step away. I think I have the, er, key code sequencer in here somewhere.' He fumbled in his tool belt, shrugged, and punched a hole in the release panel.

The door reluctantly slid open. 'I'll have to take a look at that later,' he mumbled, ushering the guests into Blaster's domain, an elongated hall that was partitioned into smaller sections. Autobots with data boards and CPOs pushed past each other, lost in buzzwords and code-talk. A stairway led to a balcony full of encryption experts, pale green robots tethered to their consoles by thick curls of wire. Down below, the hall throbbed with fractured noise – the sound of info-saturation and data-weight, of modems and CPUs.

Ratchet opened the door to Blaster's office and evaporated the conversation inside. Ultra Magnus stood up, squeezed the doctor's hand and returned Mirage's nod.

'Sorry I couldn't meet you earlier. Something came up.'

'Doesn't it always?' said Wheeljack nervously. 'It's non-stop down here.'

'Yes, but this is different. A few minutes ago, Rewind detected some unexpected signals: life signs.'

'I was monitoring the ATI system,' said Rewind, 'and an outside sweep picked up three biocodes.'

Mirage frowned. 'Did you pinpoint their location?'

'Take a look on screen,' said Blaster. 'The Decepticon Fortress, co-ordinates E219210. Constructed from the remains of the Harrison nuclear power plant in 1984, it served as the Decepticons' Earthen headquarters for a number of years, on and off.'

'Currently "off". They abandoned it in 1996, after the Galvatron fiasco.' Mirage folded his arms. 'Why would they leave their own men behind?'

'They wouldn't,' said Ultra Magnus. 'Which is why we believe that the biocodes belong to Autobots who are trapped inside.'

Blaster pointed to three sets of digits underneath the Fortress. 'The biocodes are prefixed X, and that only happens—'

'When a Transformer is comatose,' finished Ratchet. 'I take it you've cross-checked the codes with all known Autobots and Decepticons?'

'Our records are somewhat incomplete,' admitted Magnus. 'We have details of everyone in the City, and you guys,' he nodded to Ratchet and Mirage, 'have probably got some more in Iacon. Even ignoring the Empire, that still leaves gaps.'

'So what are you going to do?' asked Mirage.

'I'm going to send a Search and Retrieve team to collect whoever's inside.'

'I'll go,' said Ratchet. 'If these Autobots are comatose they'll need medical attention. And besides, it won't hurt to do some sightseeing while I'm here. Mirage can keep me company.'

'Fine. I'll have Hound, Trailbreaker and Bluestreak meet you at the hangar in a few minutes. Be careful out there. I don't want to tell Rodimus that two of his men are coming home in stasis pods.'

'Shhhhhhh.'

Nightbeat pressed a finger to his lips and waited for Doubleheader to calm down. 'I can't understand a word you're saying when you speak with both heads.'

The Pretender removed his twin-visored helmet and cleared his throats. 'It's Longtooth - he's disappeared!'

'What do you mean disappeared? On a mission?'

'We were asked to investigate reports of weapons trafficking between Polyhex and Tene, but Longtooth didn't want to leave without his Pretender shell. You know how nervous he gets nowadays.'

Nightbeat nodded. He knew the feeling.

'Anyway, I'm outside his habitation unit, waiting for him to tool up, but he's taking ages. I call him but there's no reply. After a few seconds I break down the door, and get this—'

'He's not there.'

'Exactly! No trace of him at all.' Doubleheader leant across the desk conspiratorially. 'And Nightbeat, I saw him go inside.'

'You've spoken to Rodimus?'

'He sent me here.'

Ironic, thought Nightbeat - he hasn't even crossed the corridor to say hello. He got up. 'Why don't you show me Longtooth's quarters? I'm not saying I'll find anything, mind.'

'Thanks, Nightbeat,' said Doubleheader, following him to the door. 'Why is it so dark in here?'

'Oh, I guess I just prefer it that way.'

The moon hung low above the horizon, colouring a desert floor that was rippled and pleated, shaped by a thousand hands. Five Autobots crossed the pores and dryness lines as they headed for the Decepticon fortress.

'Never thought I'd see this place again,' said Trailbreaker, struggling with armfuls of explosives. 'Wasn't Shockwave the last one to doss here?'

'Megatron, 1996,' corrected Mirage, activating the Autosshuttle's cloaking device.

The wind flicked dust against their bodies, weaving granules between flex-plates and convex-joints. Up ahead, a weathered slope crept towards the moon like an arcing wave on the brink of collapse. The fortress was glued to the summit.

'The humans really should look after their toys,' Hound sighed, pointing to an upturned tank. 'That thing's been here for thirty years.'

'It's a bit more than a ball over the garden fence,' said Ratchet. 'They're probably too scared to ask for it back.'

Mirage clicked his fingers. 'Concentrate, people. Let's leave the mindless prattle to Bluestreak.'

'Hey!'

'I'm *joking*.' Mirage climbed onto a ledge and felt for structural weaknesses in the fortress, stroking and pressing with gynaecological precision. 'Lay the explosives here, Trailbreaker.'

The proton packs were heaped like sandbags, there was a muddled rush of flame, and suddenly the Autobots were staring into an ancient chamber.

‘I know the Decepticons were an unruly bunch,’ said Hound, stepping inside, ‘but they could have cleaned up before they left.’

Trailbreaker found the door. ‘Let’s make this fast and efficient, guys. We don’t want to outstay our welcome.’ He remembered speaking to Gears about the crude medical facilities on the upper levels and looked about for a stairwell.

As they ventured deeper into the Fortress its Earthly origins became clearer. The Harrison nuclear power plant had been scraped from the ground and squeezed like modelling clay. The walls were spastic with contortion – bent girders, buckled plating and a thousand strands of metal had been chopped and pulped and folded. The main passageway ran into a high-ceilinged chamber, where a dirty green throne blinked under a spotlight.

Bluestreak ignored Ratchet’s warnings and lowered himself into the seat. ‘I wonder how many psychopaths have sat here?’ he said, adopting a dramatic pose. ‘Maybe it’s cursed: you sit here too long and you go mad. What do you reckon, Trailbreaker? Do I look like a self-obsessed megalomaniac?’

‘As a matter of fact—’

‘Stop bickering – both of you,’ snapped Mirage. He dragged his hand across a portion of writing on a dusty wall. “‘Scourcyclonavatron...?’” What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘It’s “Scourge”, “Cyclonus” and “Galvatron,”’ said Trailbreaker, shining a torch over a less confused portion of script. ‘It’s been lasered into the wall.’

‘Shockwave was living alone here for a while,’ noted Hound. ‘Perhaps he did a bit of, you know, interior decorating.’

Bluestreak got off the throne. ‘Let’s find those Autobots and go. This place is freaking me out.’

Death’s Head sunk into the pilot seat’s leathered contours. The Hybridian spacecraft was overpriced, over-designed and overindulgent: he loved it. He wondered how many of their aeronautical designers had collapsed, exhausted, after a lifetime of flattening angles and sculpting curves, after sleepless nights spent ironing each crease and gibbous strand. They’d done a spectacular job: as the craft sliced towards Aquaria it practically scored paper-cuts across the ether.

He crossed his arms and let the state-of-the-art navicom plot a course through the planetoid’s volatile orbit, through the dry-storms and aqua-saturates. The hand-woven upholstery held him tight as he contemplated the events of the last few hours.

He’d been right, of course: Unicron’s exploding time machine had deposited him on Hybridia, home to the richest traders in the galaxy. The planet had been a nondescript sludge-covered rock called Messotania until an abortive cyberforming campaign had tipped the ecosystem and created a mismatched, technoganic landscape. The Hybridians had been surprised to see him. After all, it was now 2012, four years after his supposed death. His reputation as a peacekeeper had spread posthumously, so much so that he was known as ‘Godkiller’.

The Patriarchs had made him stand on show while debating the need for his skills. Buzzing from recharge and systems overhaul, he’d wondered why such exposition was necessary – why couldn’t they just tell him who to kill, charge his credit card and point him in the right direction? Instead, he’d been forced to listen to tales of deep-sea pods, diving teams and something called the Itinerary.

He’d drifted off here and there, but this was the gist: an exploration team had been despatched to Aquaria, a lifeless water world, after a Hybridian cruiser had spotted a UFO hugging the far side of its orbit. The craft had disappeared before the Hybridians could get a fix, but, what with Aquaria being on the Itinerary and all, the Patriarchs had initiated a follow-up.

Only one of the team returned: Aybe B’rok had been shuffled into the spotlight and interrogated while the Patriarchs played scraps of mustard-grained vidcam footage – footage that climaxed with two wide-eyed aliens screaming and a crunch of savage static. Foul play, undoubtedly, but no one knew who was responsible. And, as Death’s Head had patiently pointed out, a contract on a nameless foe was the most expensive of all. Even so, he’d given his price expecting to haggle (not many governments can afford ten billion shanix). If he’d known they would accept so readily, he’d have asked for twenty.

He stared through the cockpit’s viewscreen. It was raining outside; a thousand fizzing tadpoles slalomed across the plexiglass. Down below, the ocean was a mess. Waves chased the horizon round and round the planet. He suddenly had an odd thought, and realised that the ship’s freethinking security system

was transmitting a telepathic warning. He snatched the manual controls, checked the radar, and realised that something was approaching him from underwater.

Ratchet surveyed the Decepticon medical bay and felt a knot of disgust tighten in his stomach. He counted zigzagging circuit slabs, dried patches of oil and surgical instruments scabbed with lubricant. Under a cone of light in the centre of the ward, a scrap of corrugated iron doubled as an operating table.

‘So this is how the other half lived,’ said Mirage. ‘Or died.’

Ratchet tried not to imagine the slapdash operations that had taken place where he was standing (dirty hands sifting through open stomachs, oil surging up through tight teeth, the surgeon’s knife cutting cables under purple sparks). He thought instead of his surgery, AMC1, with its spotlights and its violent hygiene (chalk-white walls, tiled floors, the acid tang of turpentine and mouthwash). It was the physical and moral opposite of this grizzled Decepticon theatre, and yet the inpatients would have been the same: helpless robots who need to be numbed and comforted.

He was a soldier, a mechanic and an engineer, but above all he was a doctor. The best tool-and-die man on Cybertron, they said. The Ark’s crash-landing on Earth all those years ago had set in motion a chain of events that had carried him from planet to planet; for too long he’d been forced to make do with meagre resources and second-hand tools.

Now the war had entered a different phase, and early this year he had established an underground medical centre to embroil himself in his work. Sure, he’d jumped at the chance to see Earth again, but the sight and smell of this dingy Decepticon grease-pit had reminded him of his duties. He needed to get back to Cybertron as soon as possible.

‘Hey, Ratchet.’

It was Hound, who was poking around in the corner. ‘Is it just me, or is lot of equipment missing? I know this place isn’t in the same league as your Iaconian pad, but even the basic hardware has gone. The room’s been gutted.’

‘The throne room was practically stripped bare as well,’ said Bluestreak.

‘I know Shockwave transferred a lot of equipment to Trypticon when he relocated underwater,’ said Mirage, remembering all the stories Wheeljack had told him about the Earthforce years.

‘Yeah, but Trypticon can transform into a battle station, so he was well equipped already. This place is empty apart from a few computer terminals and these circuit slabs, which says to me that the Decepticons didn’t leave in a hurry. It just makes me wonder why they left three Autobots behind. Wouldn’t it have been simpler just to kill them? You know, tie up any loose ends?’

‘Hey guys, take a look at this.’ Trailbreaker was standing in a doorway half-hidden by leaning shadow. He opened his mouth to say ‘I think I may have found what we’re looking for’, but Mirage was already dragging his torch beam over a copper plate that read *Cold Storage Chamber*. Underneath, some bored Decepticon had written, in pidgin Iaconian, ‘*Come bury your dead*’.

‘Trailbreaker, you may have hit the jackpot,’ said Mirage, illuminating a passageway lined with wall-mounted cylindrical pods. He counted twelve on each side, set at waist level and tilted forward, covered in cables and energon feeds. They filtered pink light onto the guttered floor.

‘Cold stasis,’ Ratchet said breathlessly, and pressed his head against the nearest pod. ‘Oh my god.’

‘What’s inside?’ asked Bluestreak.

‘Not what – who. It’s Centurion.’

‘The robot the humans built? I thought Wheeljack brought him back on-line in 1994?’

‘That was a clone,’ said Ratchet flippantly. ‘Grimlock ordered Wheeljack to build an FC from scratch. This guy,’ he tapped the plexiglass, ‘is the original. He hasn’t been seen in over twenty years, since he was blown up above the Thames.’ He jabbed a keypad and coolant began draining from the pod. Centurion lost his buoyancy and slumped hard against his coffin.

‘This isn’t gonna kill him, is it?’ asked Bluestreak.

Ratchet shook his head. ‘Cold stasis pods sustain the occupant.’

The pod swung open, linkage cables popped loose, and Centurion collapsed into Ratchet’s arms.

‘1101101010000101011010111...whatthefhellhappened? Where am I?’

‘Among friends,’ said Hound. ‘You were temporarily deactivated. You’re inside a deserted Decepticon base.’

'Jesus Christ...' Centurion inspected his body, trying to pinpoint the pain. Why was he wet? Why was he shaking? Where was Blades?

'Megatron,' he said triumphantly. 'I remember fighting him - in London.'

'Yeah, well, a lot's happened since then,' said Ratchet. 'We'll give you a "story-so-far" on the way back to Autobot City.'

'Autobot City?'

'This is all very *nice*,' said Mirage, 'but it still doesn't explain the three unidentified biocodes.' He gestured to Centurion. 'He's not a Transformer; he doesn't have a Cybertronian biocode.'

Bluestreak ventured further down the passageway and stopped at the final set of pods. 'Here we go,' he said.

The three pods contained near-identical robots. Their heads were bowed in sleep or shame, their musculature wrapped in tangles of black wiring. Bronzed bubbles ran across their bodywork. It was a peaceful scene, a tranquil scene - soured only by the large purple insignias on their chests.

The Autobots did not recognise the Decepticons, though the sculpt and mould of their physique (slender but proportioned, with v-shaped wings branching out from the small of their backs) pointed to a secondary configuration similar, if not identical, to a old-fashioned Cybertronian triad jet. The pink liquid made it difficult to distinguish their true colours, but the first seemed blue or violet, the second a bloodshot red, and the third a resinous green. One of them had a gaping wound in his stomach.

'You mean we came all this way,' said Mirage tersely, 'to find three Decepticons that not even their own side want?'

'Anyone seen these guys before?' asked Ratchet hopefully. 'No, me neither.'

'Is that the time?' said Bluestreak, checking an imaginary chronometer on his wrist. 'I guess we'd better be off.'

'You're leaving them here?' asked Centurion.

'I'm not about to loose three more Decepticons into the world,' said Mirage. 'There must be a reason for leaving them in cold storage. No, we've traced the three biocodes and therefore fulfilled our mission.'

'Aren't you intrigued, Mirage?'

'Not particularly, Trailbreaker. Why?'

'Because I was thinking - if we can find a terminal that's linked to the Fortress database - presuming one still exists - we might be able to find out why they were placed in cold stasis.'

Moments later, Mirage was sitting in front of the Fortress's only working computer terminal. 'This shouldn't be too hard,' he said, half to himself. 'The system's protected by security programs that our code-breakers cracked years ago.'

'Surely the Decepticons purged most of the contents when they left,' said Hound.

'Yes, but they've left some scraps in the hard drive.'

'Anything we can use?'

'Hard to say. It'll take hours to comb through what's left. Perhaps if we...' Mirage poked the keyboard. 'Dammit. I've snagged some sort of tripwire. It was so obvious I walked straight into it.'

Hound commandeered the keyboard, pulled a small gold disc from the wall and put it inside a waist compartment. 'I've copied the remaining files. We can see what's left when we get back to the City.'

'Why has the screen turned red?' asked Centurion.

Mirage looked at the computer. 'Blast! The computer's linked to a cluster bomb somewhere in the Fortress! It's primed to detonate in three minutes...'

'Nice of them to give us a head start,' snapped Bluestreak, running towards the throne room.

Mirage called him back. 'If we go back the way we came we'll be slagged before we reach the basement.'

'We're near the upper levels,' said Hound, remembering Gears' vague instructions. 'I think there's another way outside.' He lingered over the keyboard as the others dashed for the medi-bay. Ratchet skidded back into the room and grabbed him by the shoulder.

'Whatever you're doing, leave it! There's no time!'

The six robots ran through the cold stasis corridor, ignoring three new puddles. They negotiated a monotony of badly lit passageways, crashing through closed doors as if they were tissue paper.

‘We’re going ’round in circles!’ cried Bluestreak.

‘Not quite.’ Ratchet pointed to an exit hatch at the end of the corridor. A platform was slowly lowering outwards. ‘Autobots, transform!’

Five vehicles launched themselves out of the Fortress in a scribble of smudged rubber. Centurion activated his boot jets and executed a perfect touchdown while the Autobots scraped to a halt at the bottom of the slope.

Having retreated to a safe distance, they braced themselves for the explosion.

It didn’t come.

After a full five minutes, Ratchet growled, ‘I don’t believe this. There wasn’t even a bomb!’

Hound raised his hand apologetically. ‘My fault. I altered the computer’s chronometer. There was a bomb – it was just counting down at a much slower rate than normal.’

Ratchet stared at him, amazement and anger vying for control of his features. ‘So when is it going to—?’

‘I dunno. I wasn’t even sure if it would work.’

‘It took us three point eight minutes to escape,’ said Bluestreak. ‘If you hadn’t tricked the computer, we’d be dead... but then being dead would probably be less painful. That was quite a fall. I’ve got lube spill, abdominal buckling, endoskeletal lacerations and—’ He pointed to an exit platform jutting out of the Fortress. ‘What the hell is that?’

Three triad jets rocketed away from the Fortress and disappeared into the clouds.

‘Damn. I must’ve released them when I hacked into the mainframe.’

Ratchet shrugged. ‘You weren’t to know, Mirage. Shall we pursue?’

‘No. Our shuttle’s half a mile away and they’re obviously fast. Besides, Trailbreaker needs an energon boost.’

Without prompting, Centurion picked up Trailbreaker and followed the group of tired, damaged robots back to the de-cloaked shuttle.

The Fortress exploded behind them.

Six heat-seeking proton missiles split the ocean’s surface and zeroed in on Death’s Head’s spacecraft. They mimicked its movement, weaving jet trails between the sea and the sky.

Death’s Head engaged full-thrust and flung his ship in another direction, hoping to disorientate the missiles’ guidance systems. It didn’t work: they regrouped and accelerated. He recalled similar situations, and how they always ended with his body being scattered over a large area.

He rebooted autopilot, set a collision course with the sea, and clambered into the deep-sea pod strapped underneath the spacecraft. The pod dropped and hit the water just as the spacecraft exploded. He always liked to cut it fine.

Directional thrusters slowed his descent, and spotlights gave depth and grain to the water. He cursed himself for underestimating the enemy, whoever they were, and for the first time wondered whether he would return to Hybridia unscathed.

‘Mission log 535,’ he whispered into his thumb-mic. ‘750 metres below the Hybridians’ drop-off point and, as yet, I have detected no trace of life, indigenous or otherwise. May have triggered automatic defence mechanisms on arrival; may not necessarily be anyone down here.’ He looked out the window. ‘Yeah, right.’

‘According to the tox report, this entire planet’s covered in *aqua fortis*. Bad news for most mechanoids – thankfully, I am impervious.’ He paused to catch the reams of data sliding off screen. ‘This stuff’s lethal to Abraxians, Scarvixians, Cybertronians, Junkions... hundreds of robotic races. It’s been on the GPO blacklist for years.’

The search beams shuddered as the pod fell towards an abyss. ‘I can see no outposts or installations. Heading into a fissure now.’ He cut all thrust, and as the pod slipped into freefall he had another look around.

In the distance he saw hundreds of metallic creatures. They moved as if responsive to the threads and currents of the sea, a few of them peeling away to chase the walls of the abyss. They were ugly, even by his

pitiful standards – lime-green eyes, scalene fins and a fat body that tapered to a spiked tail. He was so engrossed that he almost missed the fact that one of the creatures was swimming towards him.

He grabbed the controls and tried to change direction, but a jutting ledge blocked his ascent. There was no time for aggressive action, no time to look for weapon systems he knew did not exist. He grappled with the airlock but his fingers would not behave: they were stocky and stubborn and refused to bend to his will. When the hatch finally opened, the creature outside was already widening its jaws.

He swam away as the pod was swallowed whole. The searchlights having been extinguished, the creature somersaulted against the current and darted back to the others.

‘Talk about shedding skins,’ thought Death’s Head. ‘First the skimmer, now the pod. Nothing left to lose, yes?’ He landed on the seabed and pondered the enormity of his situation. It was impossible to swim to the surface (he would burn out long before halfway), even if he managed to maintain an upward course. In the end, he decided to fumble around on foot – what else was there to do? Sit down and seize up?

He’d wandered the abyss for several hours before light appeared in the distance. A monstrous submarine slid past, nuzzling the seabed, its trunk-like body spiked with turrets. Sensing his ticket to ride, he swapped his left hand for an axe and clamped himself to the vehicle.

Time passed, and eventually the submarine’s search beams hit a smooth metal wall built into the cliff face. Access plates slid back and the sub slipped into a cavernous docking chamber. Drainage hatches started to gulp water, lights came on, and Death’s Head realised that he was inside.

Inside what, he did not know.

Jazz lay on a circuit slab inside Autobot City’s medi-bay, his head reduced to a jawbone and a brain module. Ratchet and Fixit leant over the body, frowning. It was raining outside. Shadows were projected onto every surface; the walls looked like they were bleeding.

Ultra Magnus, Mirage, Hound and Wheeljack watched the operation from a glass-plated gallery. Mirage clenched and unclenched his wrists, rooted to the spot. ‘I still – can someone explain this to me? – I still can’t quite understand how this happened. I mean, three Decepticons... It’s *Autobot City*, for God’s sake!’

‘It’s partly my fault,’ said Wheeljack. ‘I’d shut down the defences to make repairs. Whether they knew it or not, they attacked at the right time. One of them, the green one, wrestled a rifle from Jazz and put him down with one shot. One shot, right through the forehead. The rest of his team were beaten unconscious – minimum fuss, just a few well-placed blows. They made off with our best shuttle before I could intercept them, and then cloaked themselves before the Aerialbots could pursue.’

‘Who are these Decepticons, anyway?’ asked Ultra Magnus. ‘And how did they end up in cold storage?’

Hound pulled the gold disc from his waist compartment. ‘I think it’s time we found out.’

Nightbeat stood up and rubbed his chin. He looked around Longtooth’s quarters – at the recharge slab, the laser rifle, the battered copy of the Autobot Code (complete with red-lined amendments and crossings-out), the swivel chair and the six energon clips arranged in a tight tetrahedron. There was nothing out of the ordinary here, just the usual generic personal effects. Only the Pretender shell stood out – stashed in the corner, upright and unblinking, its two battered halves were as bright as pantomime scenery.

‘No sign of any scuffle or altercation,’ Nightbeat said at length. ‘No upset objects or damaged surfaces.’ He prodded the floor with his foot, looking for the hidden trapdoor, the winding staircase.

‘This is how I found it,’ said Doubleheader from the door. ‘What are you thinking?’

‘Before I arrived I was thinking personal warp gate... but if someone warped out of a room this small – which I doubt is even possible – I’d expect to see an exit pattern. And it would smell of carbonite or petrolene.’

‘So what can we do? I know Longtooth wasn’t the most popular Autobot, but he was my friend. Are we just going to forget about him?’

Nightbeat felt he should offer some words of comfort or pat his team-mate on the back and reassure him that Longtooth would be found, but the words would have sounded glassy and hollow. ‘I’ll write a report for Rodimus,’ he said instead. ‘I don’t know what else I can do at the moment.’ He ushered

Doubleheader into the corridor. 'I know this may sound insensitive, but do you think Longtooth wanted to disappear?'

'I don't get it. Why would he want to disappear?'

Nightbeat shrugged. He could think of hundreds of reasons. He left the room, switched off the lights and closed the door.

Burnt into the floor of Longtooth's quarters, glowing in the dark, was a perfect figure eight.

The stolen Autobot shuttle moved deeper into hyperspace, passing between imprints, echoes and silhouettes. In the Void, nothing held true – space itself was white, not black, and the normal landmarks and signposts – nebulae, gas funnels and star fields – were simply dark copies of the real thing.

The three Decepticon escapees sat on the bridge and stared straight ahead. There was no conversation. How different it had been at first. The aftermath of cryogenic coma, the rush of reactivation – it had been ablaze with touch and taste and sound. They had surrendered to the impulse, escaped their prison and taken to the air.

One thought had overridden all else: a specific location more vital and urgent than their own names, a planet unlike the alien world on which they had awoken. They could not explain the motivation, but the thought was there all the same, guiding their flight path, goading them on. They had pinpointed the largest congregation of similar beings, stolen a spacecraft and set off towards the co-ordinates.

But now... perhaps it was the boredom of null-space, perhaps it was the aching silence, but the zeal that had carried them this far was gone. They felt betrayed, and it was an overwhelming feeling, like drowning in feathers or sand, like slow-motion suffocation.

They'd felt it before.

The shuttle phased back into reg-space and the Decepticons stood up expectantly, wondering whether they would recognise the planet they had travelled so far to find. They already knew its name: Aquaria.

Death's Head loosened his axe and rolled off the sub, happy to let the current drag him towards the floor of the docking chamber. He was sucked through the dark, red-ringed mouth of a chemical duct and flushed into the bowels of the complex. His world became a delirious rush of wastewater and hot flotsam. Blind, lost and anxious, he dug his fingertips into the wall and waited for the *aqua fortis* to drain away. When he stood up he was shaking.

He wrung litres of fluid from his cloak, drained his mouth grille and replaced his left hand.

What was this place? A penal colony? A research base? A city? He worked a fingernail into an overhead panel, wondering who was here and what they were hiding. The panel came free and he climbed onto a simple set of rungs: at least the inhabitants of the complex were a similar size.

The ladder led to a low-ceilinged corridor, greasy-green and sparkling-dark. He noticed lettering on the opposite wall, and with equal amounts of curiosity and dismay realised that he did not recognise the language. Although versed in thousands of galactic dialects, the loops and curlicues meant nothing to him. The only vaguely universal aspect was a rigid pentagram. As he began to explore the interlacing passageways he saw the same symbol reappear on doors and oubliettes.

He hugged each curve and corner, wondering where everyone was. The next corridor was always as empty as the last, and he began to wonder whether the submarine had been empty too – some automated leftover going through the motions. Only a persistent drone in the background convinced him of activity.

Eventually he came upon a clearing, a nexus for the tunnels that ran like spokes towards some distant outer rim. In front of him was a vault door hundreds of metres high. He rubbed the surface and activated microprocessors in his fingertips.

'Tactile strength: indeterminate. Composition: indeterminate. Depth: indeterminate.' He wandered off. 'Very enlightening, yes?'

Several miles away he found an unlocked door with pentagrams on either side. The room beyond was empty, but the floor was covered in glowing circles.

'Some kind of afterglow,' he whispered into his thumb, 'but caused by what?'



Venturing deeper into the room, he heard voices and heavy machinery. He jogged towards an archway at the far end of the hall that opened onto a small balcony. The ceiling, only a few metres above, was heavy with lattice lights and spot-lamps. Seeing what was happening below would mean stepping into the open, and with the thought of personal fortune burning in his mind, he did just that.

And there they were.

Stretching out almost as far as he could see, lost in the near-infinite chamber below: tens of thousands of figures. An entire population trapped and cosseted within four whitewashed walls. They were clustered around hundreds of pea-green spacecraft, shouting orders to each other, stretching and swearing and spitting.

Quintessons.

‘Well I can’t say I’m surprised.’

‘What do you mean?’

Mainframe did not take his eyes off screen. ‘Decepticon netware is never simple. These files are buried under at least four interdependent defence grids. If you make a mistake, the whole thing crashes.’

Blaster turned to Mirage. ‘You’re lucky the data was stored on an outdated disc: anything more recent and we’d never have been able to access it.’

‘Hey, never say never.’ Mainframe grinned behind his mouth-plate, the only area of his face visible under the bowl-shaped interface helmet. He moved his head cautiously, exploring the remnants of a scorched Decepticon cyberscape.

Based on controversial Actuality technology, the new CVR machine was invaluable to the Autobots, particularly when it came to exploring booby-trapped info-domains. Mainframe had been hooked up for over an hour. He had unearthed Decepticon strike plans, munitions inventories and causality stats – all of them years out of date. He had used every trick in the book to pinpoint information relating to the three cryogenically frozen Decepticons, every Institute-approved sleight-of-hand and side step: back door codes, confidence programs, backtrack fields, Trojan data-breaks...

It wasn’t until he dusted down a retrieval program created twenty years ago that he’d uncovered the Holy Grail: a portion of Soundwave’s log tapes from 1986. The majority of entries were beyond retrieval, but a few could be salvaged. Now, in a junk-filled corner of the Comms Chamber, he scoured the intact files.

‘I think I’ve got it!’ he yelled.

Mirage stared at the classified information scrolling across the overhead screen. He felt he had a personal stake in this – after all, it was his negligence that had led to the Decepticons’ reactivation. Now, an incapacitated Jazz and a stolen Autoshuttle later, they were still out there, and any spilt oil would be on his hands.

He hated things beyond his control. As soon as Mainframe had decoded the information he would find Magnus, deliver his verdict on the City and head back to his poky seventh-floor office underneath Iacon. He thought of life in the Archives Centre; he wondered whether Rodimus had made headway with the troop inspection; whether Rev-Tone and the others were back on-line; whether Prowl and Perceptor had told Nightbeat the real reason for his secondment...

The sudden eruption of data onscreen – a mixture of Tarnian and gibberish – focused his thoughts.

Mainframe hoisted the CVR helmet off his head. ‘May I present log entry 001/51/176! I’ve decoded Soundwave’s report as best I can, but some areas remain indecipherable. You’re getting the abridged version.’

‘This report was made in January 1986,’ said Mirage. ‘That’s shortly after Optimus Prime’s head was reunited with his body, but before our search for the Dinobots. Let’s see... Soundwave and Co. had captured Bumblebee – that puts this around the time of the ‘Ultimate Autobot’ debate – and were heading back to the Decepticon Fortress when they were attacked by three unidentified Decepticons. The attackers came out of nowhere and seemed disoriented. Soundwave said they were captured without much of a fight. He tried to read their minds but found nothing – he calls it “white noise”. He’s made some sort of footnote... he thinks that they were some kind of Cybertronian upgrade.’

‘A new generation of Decepticons,’ said Blaster. ‘How prescient.’

‘Hmm, yes and no. He thinks they were sent by Lord Straxus to wipe out Megatron’s Decepticons. Nothing to indicate knowledge of the Empire, just typical ‘Con paranoia.’

‘Anything else?’

‘Not much. Soundwave sealed them in cold storage for further study.’

Blaster tapped the intercom on his chest. ‘Rewind, run a search through human news reports circa January 1986. See if there are any sightings of the Decepticons that attacked us earlier.’ He turned to Mirage. ‘So. Why do you think they were left in stasis?’

‘Shockwave and Megatron succeeded Soundwave shortly after he made this report. Different leaders have different priorities. Perhaps the Decepticons were deemed too dangerous to release. Perhaps they were just forgotten about.’

‘Whatever the reason,’ said Mainframe, shutting down the CVR, ‘at least we know more about them.’

‘Do we?’ said Mirage. ‘We still don’t know where they came from, who sent them, why no one recognised them... In fact, right now I’d say—’

‘I know, I know,’ said Mainframe, waving his hand dismissively. ‘We have more questions than answers. Well you’ve wrung all you can out of this thing.’ He threw the redundant disc at Mirage.

Blaster pressed his forefinger against his temple, listened to an internal message, and turned to the others. ‘Rewind can’t pinpoint any positive sightings, but he has found details of a tremendous energy burst that roughly matches the co-ordinates.’

Mirage thought for a moment. ‘A battle took place, so there would have been plenty of explosions. It could be anything.’ It was time to give up, he decided. Time to confront Ultra Magnus and return to Iacon, safe in the knowledge that sooner or later the three Decepticons would reappear.

Sitting behind his computer monitor and fuzzed with weak light, Nightbeat reviewed his report on Longtooth’s disappearance. In his mind, it did not read well. It was dry and detached, a style he had unconsciously perfected over the last few years. His older write-ups were characterised by an incisiveness he feared he had now lost.

*In conclusion, I am at a loss to explain a method of abduction, or, alternatively, a means of escape. I recommend, however, that Longtooth’s disappearance be treated as suspicious, and advise High Command to warn all Autobase troops to be on their guard.*

The final paragraph stared up at him until he realised what was missing. He leant forward and continued typing.

*Whilst Longtooth’s fate is undoubtedly a cause of concern in and of itself, I must point out the wider repercussions of his disappearance. Those who knew Longtooth well are no doubt suffering more than anyone, but in a pressurised environment such as this, where grief is often misinterpreted as weakness, those most affected will often suppress their true feelings. For this reason, commanding officers often overlook the trauma of losing a close friend.*

He signed it off *A/0000007* instead of Nightbeat, and immediately wondered why he’d used his old ‘name’.

He decided to deliver the report to Rodimus Prime personally, seeing as his office was just across the corridor. It would give him the opportunity to ask about his transferral. He stepped out of his quarters and saw Rodimus striding down the corridor. Prowl was there too, a few steps behind, hugging a databoard and talking to Prime’s back.

‘Good to see you at last, commander,’ called out Nightbeat.

‘Ah, Nightbeat. Welcome to Autobase. Haven’t really had an opportunity to say hello, I’m afraid.’

Prowl caught up with Rodimus and assessed the new arrival. ‘Hello, Nightbeat. It’s been a long time. How was your trip?’

‘Actually, we were attacked by—’

'Excellent.' Prowl turned back to Rodimus. 'So the next High Command meeting is in two hours, okay? Top of the agenda is tomorrow's troop inspection. Red Alert's still worried about an aerial blitz and I've had Thunderclash banging on about defence grids all afternoon.'

Rodimus nodded. 'Anything else?'

Prowl looked at his databoard, despite having memorised every last shred of data. 'Let's see... Perceptor has details of alleged Decepticon activity on the Kalis/Tyrest border and I'm expecting an update on Emyrissus. Mirage and Ratchet should be back in about an hour, so I've pencilled in the verdict under any other business.'

Rodimus looked at Nightbeat. 'Have you finished that report on Longtooth?' He was handed the disc. 'Excellent. Prowl, put this on the agenda too.'

'Yes, commander.' Prowl marched off, tapping his databoard.

'So,' said Nightbeat, as casually as he could, 'Why am I here?'

'You're the detective,' said Rodimus. 'Why do you think you're here?'

'I'm beginning to think it's because you wanted to keep an eye on me; to give me the little jobs no one else wanted.'

'Wrong on both counts.'

'Rodimus, I've been here over a day now. I've been shown into my quarters, given a routine investigation and generally left alone, and—'

'And I thought that's what you liked: a dark office, mountains of casework, solitude...'

'Yes, but I had all that at Delphi. No one's had the decency to tell me why I was brought here. Not even Siren.' He followed Prime into a vacuum lift. 'Look, I'll make it simple. Question one: am I in Iacon for a reason?'

'Yes.'

'Question two: what is it?'

Rodimus laughed. 'I have you in mind for a particular mission. Only seven other people know the details. I've scheduled a meeting after the troop inspection and I want you to attend. You'll get your answers then.'

The lift slowed down and they stepped into a basement that resembled the inside of a dirty oven.

'Why can't you tell me now? Don't you trust me?'

'It's not a question of trust, it's a question of safety.'

'Whose safety?'

'Your own. What you don't know can't hurt you, as they say. If Galvatron got wind of what we've discovered he'd do anything – *anything* – to find out more.' Prime reached into a puddle, pulled open a hatch and dropped down into a utility duct. 'I have a responsibility to those under my command,' he continued. 'In one day I should have all the information I need. Bear with me.'

'As long as I get an explanation. Soon.'

'Come on. I've dragged you this far – you might as well visit AMC1 with me.'

They set off down the utility duct, knee-deep in Iaconian detritus: petrolene and energon scum, lube-spill and discharge. The surface was taut and shrunken, like dry skin. Like everything else that couldn't be loaded and fired, the network of subterranean ducts had, over the years, fallen into disrepair; now, they were little more than Cybertron's tea-stained intestines, bunched and coiled beneath each of the major city-states.

Nightbeat saw a lime-green letter 'A' on the wall, its slanting legs testing the water. Markings such as these were originally intended to guide soldiers home, to Autobot base. Now, they were simply a map of defeat. Every piece of graffiti led to a gutted HQ, or a flight of stairs that stalled mid-way, or a vacuum lift that poked into a crater.

Rodimus stopped moving.

'What is it?' whispered Nightbeat.

'I just heard something. Don't move.'

Rodimus moved so stealthily that his boots barely disturbed the water. Nightbeat watched him dive into the clearing up ahead and tensed for inevitable screech of gunfire.

It didn't come.

Instead, Rodimus shouted, 'Quark! What the hell are you doing down here?'

A small, crimson Autobot stepped out of the shadows. He was lithe but ill-proportioned, with etiolated fins sliding from his biceps to a point well above his head. His muddy chest-plate doubled as a bonnet in vehicular mode, and two headlights pointed towards a midriff grille. He was twitching.

‘Prime! Sir! I – I – I...’

‘We thought you were a Decepticon!’ thundered Rodimus. ‘Why are you following an unauthorised route to the medicentre?’

‘I’m on my way to visit Rev-Tone, commander. I, er, found a short cut. There’s a fresh crater a few miles from here, near the outskirts of Helios.’

‘You’ve found an unprotected route that leads directly underneath Autobase?! Please tell me that Red Alert or Kup know about this.’

Quark’s hands were shaking. ‘Yessir. Red Alert’s writing up a report.’

Rodimus walked off, shaking his head. ‘Why am I always the last to know anything?’

Soundwave stared at the door to Galvatron’s throne room. He could sense the twelve security cameras bearing down on him, unblinking as they traced every plate and rivet on his freshly steam-cleaned body. A laser doodled patterns on the back of his dark blue skull, waiting for an excuse to fire.

The door slid open.

Walking into the darkness felt like surrendering to a clammy palm, all troughs and ancient sweat. The thin passageway was full of grey-stone effigies of dead Decepticon commanders, not all of them fondly remembered: Trannis, Scarab, Shockwave, Thunderwing, Bludgeon, Scorponok. Even Straxus was there (head *and* body). Only Jhiaxus was conspicuous by his absence.

As always, Soundwave wondered whether he would one day join those hallowed ranks and, as always, whether he wanted to.

He walked into a central chamber that was closer in size and style to the famous Xerxes arena than a war-room. Décor-wise, it was the usual: pensive up-lighting, glossy black metal and a gold Decepticon symbol that floated like sunlight on the polished floor.

Galvatron sat on a throne that was ten sizes too big, his skeletal fingers curling over the arm rests. His shoulders sloped under a corona of shadow. His head was scarred by two slits of red light, as if a knife had been dragged across his eyes.

Soundwave assumed his usual position at the tip of the Decepticon symbol, folded his hands behind his back and waited for Galvatron to acknowledge him. Behind the throne was a huge convex window and a panoramic view of Polyhex, now little more than a smouldering wedge of metal; something Unicron would stub his toe on.

As Soundwave stared at the precincts and sandpaper slopes he remembered Galvatron’s promise in 2009: ‘*When the Autobot stain is removed, we can begin reshaping Cybertron to our specifications.*’ But all he had done since then was reinforce Darkmount, rearrange his forces, sit on his throne and stare. Soundwave knew there were differences between Galvatron and Megatron, but one thing was certain: the Decepticon in front of him fought a far more solitary war.

‘You seen preoccupied, Soundwave.’ The voice, far deeper than Megatron’s, bounced off every wall.

‘Not at all. As you ordered, I oversaw the relocation of three hundred troops to Sixshot in Helix. The Leagus silo is now fully converted, and will house them comfortably.’

‘Do you trust him?’

‘Commander?’

‘Sixshot. Can he be trusted?’

‘I... He seems loyal to the Decepticon cause.’

‘That’s not what I’m asking and you know it. Being loyal to the Decepticon cause and plotting to overthrow me are two different things.’ Galvatron stood up. ‘You’ve read his mind – what’s he thinking?’

‘Sixshot is arrogant and power-hungry, but he won’t betray you. He is grateful for the promotion but thinks he is destined for greater things.’

‘Short of assassinating me, the only way he can assume a higher rank is by replacing you.’ Galvatron turned around to take in the view. ‘Send Frenzy, Rumble and Laserbeak to Leagus and tell Sixshot that they are there to bolster his forces. Have them report back to you on tactical decisions, battle plans – anything that takes their interest.’

Soundwave knew he should have nodded and left, but something in Galvatron's words held him back. 'Commander, am I to take it that you're looking for an excuse to kill Sixshot?'

'My dear Soundwave, I'm asking for feedback on Sixshot's strategies, tactics and judgement.' Galvatron turned to face him. 'I'm looking for an excuse to kill *you*.'

The construction hangar was carpeted with Quintessons, with thousands of grey-green biomechanicals swarming like bees on honeycomb. Crowds of grunts and tech-heads modified triple-pronged attack craft – Tridents – to the slap and thud of industrial machinery.

Death's Head was not easily moved, but the spectacle below was overwhelming. He squared his thumb and forefinger, carved the crowd into blocks and counted over twelve thousand Sharkticons.

Dammit.

He hadn't brought enough ammunition.

He risked another step onto the balcony and took a closer look at individual robots. Some were overseeing the conveyer belts, others were waving their weapons and giving orders. There was a definite hierarchy on display, but he sensed the absence of an overall leader.

Things had changed. In 2008, the Quintessons had their own planet, albeit an unstable one – an elliptic fusion of mix 'n' match geo-fragments limping endlessly around a shabby brown dwarf. What had happened in the four years he'd skipped? Was Quintesson still orbiting Omega Pytan or had it collapsed, creating a tribe of nomads?

He'd grown so accustomed to the rumble of noise that it took a second for the nearby voices to register. They were coming from behind him, from the adjoining hall. He climbed into the rafters and scooped up his cloak before two figures stepped onto the balcony.

'Work proceeds apace, Lord Xenon,' said Haxian, ushering the Imperial Majestrix to the lip of the balcony. 'The fleet will be completed within the projected launch time.'

Death's Head raised his eyebrows: his luck was finally changing. How often did an opportunity like this present itself? 'Lord' Xenon? His prime target, the leader of the Quintessons, appearing by chance? Things like this didn't happen to him normally. He studied Xenon's malformed, ovoid body, which was balanced on a column of crackling energy. Five faces encircled its fattest point, nibbling a penumbra of shadow. (He was unfamiliar with Brotherhood doctrines but caught the sledgehammer symbolism: the grotesque masks represented the Pentacore: the Dark Gods Syncorax, Akra, Kryn, Unicron and Harbinger.) Between the facemasks and the antigravity beam were dozens of techno-organic tentacles.

'Incredible, isn't it Haxian? Think how far we've come. Four years ago we teetered on the brink, and now... now all this.'

'96% of the attack craft are complete, my Lord. The ships below make up the final 4%. The new design ensures greater manoeuvrability and fuel efficiency, just as you predicted. We even have a subset of Tridents with hyperspace capabilities.'

'What about destructive capabilities? If this project is to go ahead I need to be confident that a single pilot can lay waste to an entire city.'

'Firepower was increased tenfold after General Rodern suggested that we replace the phase lasers with photon cannons and draw energy from the engine coils.'

'Hm. Remind me to thank Rodern for his input.'

'You won't need reminding, Xenon: you can thank me right now.'

Death's Head watched a third figure appear on the balcony. His humanoid physique set him apart from the standard Quintesson design. His face was a collision of razor-sharp angles, all chin and cheekbone. Serrated fins curved over his shoulders and met in the small of his back, overcompensating for fat, tubular forearms and spindly elbow joints.

'I've been looking for you, Xenon,' General Rodern continued. 'Quantax says two of the orbital motherships are complete.'

'Excellent. Tell him to de-cloak and begin trans-matting the Tridents immediately. This planet cannot support us much longer. What about the other facets of our campaign?'

General Rodern looked at Haxian who, after seeking Xenon's consent, left his superiors alone on the balcony.

'I hope you'll excuse the incredulity in my voice when I say this, Xenon, but everything is going to plan.'

'What about the armour?'

'Well, we've just bagged ourselves another prize. Haxian's been busy modifying the basic design for more accurate targeting.'

'You see, Rodern? Everything is coming together.'

Rodern stepped to the edge of the balcony and leaned on the chest-high railing. In a puerile way he enjoyed doing things that Xenon, with his impractical, idiotic bodyshell, found impossible.

'If I may speak candidly, Xenon, the launch cannot come soon enough. My troops are restless and I'm tired of laying low. Why are we developing all these contingency plans? All we need is a well-equipped army and the element of surprise. All these precautions, all these fail-safes – are they really necessary?'

'We are not taking "precautions". Taking precautions implies an element of doubt as to our victory.' Xenon slid a damp synthi-flesh tentacle around General Rodern's neck. 'You do not appreciate the importance of strategy: you only see the short-term. I see the greater picture. That is why I am the Imperial Majestrix and you, General Rodern, will never be anything more than a fourth-batch Neoseed.'

Xenon lifted Rodern off the floor. Death's Head shrank into the shadows, engrossed.

'I sometimes think you forget, Rodern, that it was I who gathered the scattered remnants of this race. It was I who oversaw the construction of this base and the retrieval of our dead warriors. If this campaign fails, we are lost. Can you not sense the significance of it all? If you had any appreciation of our heritage you would realise that we stand on the brink of a new epoch, just as our ancestors did before the Raid.'

Xenon moved Rodern over the edge of the balcony. 'If success was ever essential, it is now.'

Rodern's legs hung limply over the crowd, hundreds of metres below.

'Never overestimate your importance to me. I could kill you now and ten more would rise to take your place. Unicron made millions of Neoseeds, but there can only be one Majestrix.'

He dumped Rodern back onto the balcony. 'Return to your troops and prepare for departure.'

Rodern rubbed his neck. 'Yes, my Lord.'

As Death's Head leant forward to catch the last word, his cloak sensed an opportunity. Dragging itself across his shield and loosening its folds, the red rag dangled between the rafters. Death's Head reached out to scoop it up and saw General Rodern staring up at him. Rodern tugged the cloak, Death's Head fell, and Xenon's tentacles were on him like cling-film.

Xenon turned Death's Head over in the air as if looking for a watermark or a brand name. 'What have we here? What's your name, eavesdropper?'

'Prefer to remain anonymous, yes?'

Rodern watched the mercenary with detached interest, pleased that someone else had stolen Xenon's attention. 'How did you get in here?' he croaked.

'You left the back door open.'

'You have quite a sense of humour,' said Xenon. 'Perhaps this will impress upon you the gravity of your situation.'

He threw Death's Head off the balcony.

The bounty hunter's descent was over in seconds, but, broken down into flashes and fragments, he would have experienced it like this: free-floating disbelief, a headfirst lurch of gravity, spin-wheeling arms, a rush of warm air and a cluttered floor turning cartwheels as it raced closer. He smashed through a Trident's windscreen, wrapped himself around the cockpit controls and passed out.

Xenon looked mournfully at the damage he had caused. 'Have someone repair that Trident immediately.'

'And the intruder?'

'Bring him to the courtroom for interrogation... If he's still alive.'

Haxian reappeared on the balcony. 'Lord Xenon, we've detected a hypershuttle heading this way.'

'Approaching orbit? The first batch of Tridents has already been transferred to the *Enslaver*. Have them treat the craft as hostile, but bring whoever's inside to me. If they know the location of this base, I want to know how.' He turned to Rodern. 'This is a sign, you know. It's starting.'

On board the stolen Autobot hypershuttle:

'I've detected three objects in Aquaria's orbit. They're massive. Twenty miles long, easy. Warcruisers?'

'Maybe. Take us closer, and try to establish contact.'

'I'm getting static. They're not interested.'

'Fantastic.'

'Wait. I've got six small ships heading this way. Collision course.'

'Raise defensive shields.'

'We don't *have* any defensive shields!'

'Then what the hell have we got? I want every piece of weaponry trained on those – those...'

'Tridents.'

'I've found a gun-port on the fuselage and some photon feeds, but that's it.'

'You mean we're facing a full squad with two barrels? Perfect. Any luck with the handshake?'

'No. Blast! *They've* done this.'

The hypershuttle swerved to avoid a burst of laser. Underneath the cockpit, a lonely turret returned fire and the Tridents broke formation to evade.

'Standard Quintesson strategy. They'll break into two groups and attack from opposite sides.'

The second round of laser dappled the shuttle's underbelly and flicked a thruster off its moorings. The destruction spread inside, seeping through the cracks. Fire somersaulted through the lower decks, kicking at the walls, tumbling up the stairs, and when it could go no further, when heat-shields and vacuum slabs had rushed to stem the flow, the lower half of the ship evaporated in a haze of black and bronze.

The laser turret swivelled feebly towards a retreating Trident and fired. The Quintesson ship bucked against the blast and span out of control.

'Direct hit! Oh hell – it's heading this way! Quick! Get us clear!'

'Oh, shut up. We're finished.'

The hypershuttle exploded.

'Does it hurt?'

'No. Well, only when I talk. Or move. Or think. On reflection, Quark, yes – it does hurt - it hurts all the time.'

Rev-Tone tried to stretch out on his circuit slab, a rectangle of glistening, utilitarian hardware that resembled a bed of nails. Neat stacks of monitors recorded the movement with trigonometric accuracy. 'It's about time you paid me a visit. I thought you'd written me off – booked me a place on the next solar barge or something.'

'Hey, no one's performing the Rites of Departure just yet.'

Quark smiled and took the visitor's seat. Rev-Tone was in pretty bad shape. His altercation with Sixshot had ended with a frag grenade shedding its load across his chest. His skin was choppy, like wind-whipped sea. Insectoid robots crawled over the wound, making repairs.

The ward was as quiet as ever, smothered with boredom and shifting gears, with voices just out of earshot. Patients lay on slabs similar to Rev-Tone's, hooked up to monitoring systems that would alert First Aid or his junior medics, Search and Rescue, if their condition deteriorated, if their bright blue life-scan lines sloped low across the scanners, or if their fuel-pump skipped a beat.

In contrast to the cosy decay of the u-ducts and the prickly claustrophobia of Autobase, AMC1 was spacious and rigorously clean. Everything was white and tiled: the five main wards, the intensive care units, the incinerator, the waiting room, the admin offices, the life-support vault – even the mortuary, with its stasis pods and waste compactors, was coated in a creamy sheen.

Quark nodded hello to Ammo, who was missing both arms. At the far end of the ward, beyond a pane of tawny plexiglass, he could see First Aid at his desk. He was talking to Rodimus Prime about something – probably the new ward, still under construction, or plans to build a second hospital that would finally justify AMC's numerical suffix. Nightbeat was in there too, clicking his knuckles, reading the reports tacked to the wall and fiddling with the beryllium syringes on First Aid's desk. He looked bored.

'So, Rev-Tone, how have you been keeping yourself occupied?'

The Autobot gunner gestured to his mangled legs. 'There's not much I can do, is there? I've been soaking up the gossip and generally feeling sorry for myself.'

'Same as usual, then.'

'Touché.' Rev-Tone leaned towards his friend. 'Hey, you see Nightbeat over there? Did you know that he's been transferred here from the Canyons?'

'Yeah. I walked here with him.'

'Oh. Okay, did you know that the Avatar have gone AWOL?'

'That's ancient news! Maelstrom said he was thinking of splitting after the Strife incident.'

Rev-Tone looked defeated for a moment: he wasn't used to playing catch-up. He beckoned for Quark to pull his chair closer. 'Alright, there is one more thing I've heard, but it's top secret.' He paused to heighten the anticipation.

'Well?'

'Throwback's returned.'

'What?!'

Rev-Tone looked as if he had just been electrocuted. 'Keep it down! Ultra Magnus probably heard that!'

'That's incredible! No one ever expected to see him again!'

Quark thought back to the year 2005, when the Autobot theoscientist had volunteered for Project: Crossover, an experiment aimed at bridging parallel universes. The accumulated research was lost when Unicron had devoured Moonbase One late the following year. Throwback was classed as 'Dead' or 'Irretrievable', depending on the mourner's knowledge of pan-dimensional time travel.

'When did he get back? *How* did he get back? What happened?' The questions flowed easily, and Rev-Tone was pleased that his bombshell had caused such ripples.

'Why not ask him yourself? He's over there.'

A stranger was sitting on up on the circuit slab next to Ammo. Despite having no visible injuries, he was hooked up to more medical equipment than any other patient. His body was a curious amalgam of styles and materials, as if he had been re-graded and body-shopped with alarming regularity. Only his face seemed old, with its chipped cheeks and its well-worn visor.

'Throwback?'

'Hello, Quark.'

'I'm sorry, I – I didn't recognise you.'

'I practically built myself a new body over the course of my travels. Bits and pieces collected from parallel worlds. Souvenirs, you could call them. I guess each universe left its mark.'

'When did you get back?'

'About three weeks ago. I was fast-phasing between similar universes – "Alternaties", I call them – but spending only a few minutes in each. Intense stuff. There was this one Alternity where Unicron poked his fingertip across the Space Bridge and skewered Metroplex.' He re-enacted the scene with his hand and a looped cable. 'Then I phased onto a different Earth, with a different Metroplex, and Optimus Prime – you know, the *original* – had been resurrected in 2009.'

Quark leant forward in his chair, wrists dangling between his knees. 'So which universe were you in before you jumped here?'

'It was very similar to this one, actually – except there was this Powermaster Prime clone running around, and Red Alert had just been possessed by Unicron.'

'Amazing. So why do you think you've come back now, after seven years?'

'Actually, I've been phasing between worlds for over a century. For you, the timeline between 2005 and 2012 was straightforward. From my point of view, it went off at right angles. Retracing my footsteps wasn't easy.'

'So you steered your way back?'

'Well no, not really. I had no control over where I went. Perceptor likens it to an echo. He thinks the initial phase threw me so wide it took a hundred years to, you know, bounce back. The last few Alternaties were definitely the most similar – a lot of shared history.'

'So you've visited, what, a thousand parallel universes, each with its own set of Transformers. Any common themes?'

Throwback paused. 'Well, the vast majority involved Unicron devouring Cybertron.'



'I guess we're one of the lucky ones.'

'What makes you say that? You think we've seen the last of him?' Throwback laughed. 'I'm joking, Quark.'

'Oh. Anyway, you look very well.'

'That's because there's nothing wrong with him!' scoffed Rev-Tone. 'He's only in here because Perceptor scared to let him out of his sight.'

'They want to run some tests on me in case I jump again. This might not even be my universe.'

'Amazing,' said Quark again, and swivelled to face Rev-Tone again.

'Yes, give me some attention. Just because I haven't visited an organic Cybertron or reached the Omega Point doesn't make me a less entertaining patient.' He paused. 'Or perhaps it does.'

'Stop moaning. I've brought you a present.'

Quark checked that First Aid was still chatting to Rodimus, unclipped his shin-guard and placed an unlabelled cylinder onto the circuit bed.

'A vial of Hypergrade!' exclaimed Rev-Tone.

'Shhh! If First Aid hears I'll be court martialled!' He smiled and watched Rev-Tone unscrew the lid. 'I had to sneak it past Rescue. I thought it might make up for you missing the troop inspection.'

Rev-Tone unclipped his mouth grille and gulped liquid. 'It's tomorrow, isn't it? The biggest event since Arklaunch and I'm hooked up to a med-scanner two miles underground.' He set his drink on the edge of the slab. 'I wish I could be there.'

'It's not that big a deal. If Thunderclash has his way there won't even be an inspection.'

'Are you going?'

Quark stared at the droplet of oil trickling down the ridges in Rev-Tone's chin. 'Well, yeah... but only because I'm part of Kup's squad.'

'No, no, don't worry about it. You go along and enjoy yourself. Make sure no one forgets about us casualties of war.' He thumbed the oil from his lip. 'Heckle Prime for me.'

Quark stood up and set the chair straight. 'I'll visit again as soon as it's over.' He had reached First Aid's office when the cry lanced through the air:

'Hey Quark! Thanks for the Hypergrade!'

Centurion felt the branding iron nibble his chest. Angry sparks leapt from the contact point and smoke enveloped his torso. A hundred Autobots clapped politely, some looking at their feet, some looking at the ribbons of rain outside the assembly hall.

He hoped the Rite of Autobrand would never end. For the first time in his life he felt accepted on his own merits. He was no longer an ancient relic – his sacrifice against Megatron (a week ago to him, twenty-four years to everyone else) meant no more shame, no more embarrassment. He looked at the other robots – his new comrades – and counted red badges on chests and biceps. The familiar few – Blades, the Dinobots, Wheeljack and Ratchet's team – hogged the front row. The other faces meant nothing to him, but that would change.

Ultra Magnus switched off the branding machine and waved the smoke aside.

'Centurion, by the power vested in me by High Command, I welcome you to the ranks of the Autobots. With the Rite of Autobrand comes the responsibility to regard life as the greatest gift, the understanding that freedom is the right of all sentient beings, and the willingness to fight and die to protect the innocent.' He paused, and a shimmer of relief passed through a crowd who thought he was going to recite the other twenty-eight Articles of the Autobot Code. 'We are honoured to count you among us, Centurion. May your lustre never dull and your wires never cross.'

The loudest cheers came from Grimlock and his Dinobots, but even the other front-liners – Silverbolt, Bumblebee, Arcee, Carnivac, Ebony and Springer – shouted their approval.

Ultra Magnus reached for the ceremonial vial. 'We have each given a portion of our fuel. It is a gift that binds you morally and biologically with your brethren; a donation that, upon acceptance, will symbolise your pledge to uphold the Autobot Code.'

Centurion poured the sluggish lubricant through a wrist aperture and shuddered at the rush. The crowd clapped and began to disperse. Grimlock stomped over, Dinobots in tow, to smack the newest Autobot on the back.

Wheeljack stood on the sidelines, adjusted his tool-belt and watched Mirage sidle over to Ultra Magnus, who was patiently folding the branding machine away. Separated by a wedge of noisy Autobots, the engineer could not hear what was being said. Magnus frowned and ushered Mirage into a nearby office.

‘What’s going on there?’ asked Hound.

‘I don’t think the party atmosphere is going to last much longer,’ said Wheeljack, beckoning Ratchet over. ‘Mirage is here to assess the City, isn’t he?’

‘Yes. I’m sorry, Wheeljack. Nothing’s been decided yet.’

The office door slid open and Mirage stormed through the crowd. ‘Come on, Ratchet, we’re leaving.’

The other Autobots noticed something was wrong and stopped talking – all except Grimlock, who continued chatting loudly to Centurion about ‘old bucket-head’.

Ultra Magnus pressed his forearms against the doorframe and waited until the Dinobot had reached a full stop.

‘Autobots,’ he said, ‘I’m afraid I have some bad news.’

Black.

But a vibrant, giddy World of Black, smothering and sticky.

There was no passage of time, no progression, no temporal leap from point to point; there was no cause, just effect after effect after effect; a world of Before and After with no dividing line.

Ah, but there it was: an aberration, a crack that let light in.

And with light came sound, tinny but persistent. The darkness receded and the light became infused with colour, and colour gave the light form, and the sound gave the forms clarity.

He became aware of noises and recognised them as words. The forms merged into a cohesive picture, and the words became a facet of the picture, and suddenly Death’s Head knew who and where he was.

His wrists had been tied together with electro-chains. A Quintesson gatekeeper used a pole topped with a steel noose to keep him on the ground. The whitened metal gave him love bites as he looked up at Xenon, who was hovering above a rostrum.

‘I will not ask you again,’ said the Majestrix. ‘Are you one of them?’

Death’s Head turned the other way. The ‘courtroom’, such as it was, consisted of a Sharkticon Deathpit, empty spectator boxes and a podium. Nearby, General Rodern and a look-alike were tending to a life-support machine – a block of smooth machinery that contained three transparent spheres. Inside each one, suspended in pale green liquid, was a brain module, as dark and delicate as diced meat.

Xenon’s tendril left a shallow scar across the back of Death’s Head’s neck. ‘I can tell you’re not listening, because this really is a matter of life and death. You see, I was rather rash before – I thought you were Cybertronian. Having had a closer look, I’m not sure. You’re too crude, too basic – too *ugly*.’

‘That’s rich coming from a five-faced egg, eh?’

Xenon grabbed Death’s Head’s horns and forced him to make eye contact. ‘I’ll be honest with you. Even if you tell me what I want to know, the chances are I’ll kill you. It will be a swift and painless death – but then I always say that.’

‘The name’s Death’s Head. I’m a freelance peacekeeper. I was hired to explore this planet.’ Catching Xenon’s eye, the gatekeeper loosened the noose and allowed Death’s Hand to stand. ‘I hitchhiked my way into your base and I intend to reveal your nefarious plans to the highest bidder.’

‘Anything else?’ asked Xenon.

‘Yeah, just one more thing: release me or I’ll break free and kill every last one of you. In alphabetical order.’

‘Oh, Death’s Head. It seems almost a shame to kill someone so deluded.’ Xenon slid an oily tendril around the mechanoid’s neck and held him aloft. ‘General Quantax? Run him through.’

Rodern’s look-alike snatched a trident and plunged it deep into Death’s Head’s chest. The bounty hunter collapsed but did not scream, not even when the weapon was ripped out dragging oily streams of circuitry. He hugged the floor as the spikes broke his armour a second time, and a third.

Rodern clapped in the background.

‘Lucky he wasn’t a Cybertronian,’ said Quantax, leaving the trident to wobble in the wound. ‘Else we’d all be taking turns.’

Death’s Head raised an optic cover and saw his own entrails.

*[+++ Damage assessment pending +++ Activating internal repair program +++]*

He could feel every wound, every severed connection, every shattered hydraulic. Carefully, he released enough oil to form a shiny pool under his back and then quietly stemmed the flow. Selective shutdown killed the pain, an optic cover sealed his eye and super-advanced servomotors begin re-knitting his ravaged insides.

‘You’ve seen enough bloodshed for the day,’ Xenon said to the Sharkticon bystanders. ‘Return to your assignments. Quantax, Rodern: stay behind and activate the others.’

Rodern leant over the life-support machine. ‘Xenon, do we really need to cart these three around?’

‘Sevax, Jolup and Ryknia are veterans. Their status within the revised Quintesson hierarchy is without question. If we can keep them alive within these units then it is our duty to do so.’

Rodern scowled and took his place on the rostrum alongside Xenon. If I’d lost my entire body in battle I know I wouldn’t want to wake up inside a glass bauble, he thought to himself. I wouldn’t want to be kept alive by stim-shocks and energon boosts. What a tenuous existence. What a mockery of life.

He knew the history. Sevax, Jolup and Ryknia had ended up like this after the abortive attack on the Cybertronians in 2008: the CyberWar. He had overseen Project: Retrieval, organising stealth squads to collect dying Quintessons from Earth and Cybertron. Any troops below the repair threshold were used to help construct the base he was standing in now. At the end of the CyberWar (when the planet Quintesson was just beginning to slide over the chrono-horizon of a temporal rift), the former Imperial Majestrix, Lord Kledji, his War Minister-turned-Poet Laureate Sevax and a skeleton staff of Monarchists had boarded the last transport ship and made a break for it.

Unfortunately, Kledji had overestimated the stability of the planet, and Quintesson had exploded before his ship could get clear.

The thought of the ageing Majestrix being ripped to shreds still brought a smile to Rodern’s face. When the retrieval teams found the ship’s remains floating through space there wasn’t anything of Kledji to salvage. Not that he’d looked too hard.

Others, like Sevax, had been marginally more fortunate. Admittedly, most of his body had been scraped from its bubbling endoskeleton in a well of shearing gravity, his brain module peeled from its moorings by suction alone, but at least he’d survived. Rodern had only brought sycophants like Sevax back to curry favour with Xenon, to prove that the Project was worthwhile. True enough, a promotion to General soon followed.

As for Jolup and Ryknia – well, he had to admit he felt a grudging respect for them, or at least their tactics. Jolup had masterminded the legendary IbeX ambush that had nearly wiped out a whole Cybertronian faction. Ryknia had been his field officer. When the tide of battle had turned, the Quintessons had retreated into space to rendezvous with the central fleet. The injured and dying were left behind to rust into the battlefield – at least until it was safe enough to despatch a small stealth squad without being detected. Jolup, Ryknia and a handful of grunts were eventually found, minus most of their bodies.

As newly crowned Majestrix and self-proclaimed saviour of the Quintesson race, Xenon had decided to have Sevax, Jolup and Ryknia transferred to portable life-support. Rodern knew why: Xenon saw them as his personal council, his learned advisors. Whenever they asked for new bodies – which was frequent now that the Cargo was nearly ready for distribution – Xenon or his new favourite, the obsequious Quantax, would tell them to be patient, to wait for the right time. Perhaps it was this assurance that kept once-proud warriors like Jolup and Ryknia from requesting termination.

Jolup’s voice sounded flat and distorted as it was filtered through speakers. ‘I still don’t see why you insist on shutting down our vocal synths. You can’t just switch us on and off when you feel like it.’

‘Your voices are superfluous unless I ask you to speak,’ snapped Xenon. ‘We need to conserve all the energy we can. And incidentally, lieutenant, you are not in any position to complain.’

‘So why have we been wheeled out today?’

‘Lord Xenon!’ Haxian stormed into the courtroom and clicked his heels. ‘The hypershuttle has been disabled.’

‘Occupants?’

‘Three bodies were retrieved, although the destruction of their shuttle has temporarily deactivated them.’ Haxian paused, looking to Rodern and Quantax. ‘Commander, they appear to be Cybertronian in origin.’

‘Bring them to me. Now.’

Haxian clicked his fingers. The Decepticons swung from side to side as the gatekeepers carried them in on a pole.

‘What does this say about your precautions?’ demanded Rodern. ‘We spend four years underwater, four years hiding in this pit so that Cybertronians won’t expect another attack, and yet they seem to know exactly where to find us.’

‘It may be just a coincidence.’

‘I don’t believe in coincidences, and I don’t think you do either. If the Matrix Bearer has discovered our location we must act immediately.’

‘If the Cybertronians suspect that we are hiding on Aquaria,’ said Xenon steadily, ‘then it is just that: a suspicion. Why send three to tackle an entire army? Can you reactivate them, Haxian?’

‘I don’t think so, my Lord. All three have suffered complete internal shutdown – their brains have ceased to function.’

‘Then it appears that events beyond our control have forced our hand. Rodern, I want a volunteer suited up within five minutes. Quantax, transfer all squads to the warcruisers. We launch in ten.’ The generals walked through opposite exits.

‘My Lord, what shall I do with the Cybertronians?’

‘Take them to Ferrax. I have an idea.’

Death’s Head heard the retreating footsteps. Staring at the ceiling, the trident handle slanting into view, he sensed he was alone. Perhaps he would be left where he was, gathering dust until a passer-by kicked him into the Sharkpit.

He had to take control.

He had to fix himself, escape to Cybertron and sell his information to the Transformers. Calculating his fee was the only thing keeping him going.

Sparks flew as he yanked the trident loose. He shut his eyes against the pain, and when he opened them Xenon was standing over him, smiling.

‘I knew you weren’t dead, bounty hunter.’

Death’s Head screamed as an optic blast reopened his wounds.

‘You are now. Yes?’

Red Alert balanced on the lip of the stage, alone in the open-top arena. Diosys was battered and scuffed and rough round the edges, but it would do. In a matter of hours the entire Iaconian army would fill this space, from frontline grunts to High Command. 95% of the Resistance would stand in rank and file, in regimental lines, in squad-blocks and parade poses. It was an event he’d been planning for the last 116 days: the highlight of his career.

He was terrified.

He tugged his nose and dragged the movement across his mouth, scanning the arena for the thousandth time, ticking off a mental list of blind spots and weak points, ledges and crevices: all the places from which a Decepticon sniper could bang a bullet into Prime’s head. And while the thought of his security team spreading out between the crowds calmed his nerves a little, he still had visions of a Memocon or Insecticon nudging a crosshairs over the Autobot leader’s forehead before anyone could act.

He’d taken precautions, of course. The communications hive on C wing had been cranking out false information for weeks, filtering tidbits of fake foreign policy to all the right people: the plants, the deep-placements, the turncoats – even the Terminal Empties (the ones that hadn’t succumbed to techno-dementia or circuitburn, Chrome’s Syndrome or Thrash). All these channels led, one way or another, to the Decepticons. If he’d done his job properly – and he prided himself on doing his job properly – then enemy platoons would be combing the molten pools of Stanix right now, looking for non-existent pockets of Resistance.

He checked his chronometer, jumped to the floor and wandered around the edge of a large Autobot symbol, loitering on its dovetailed crest. In front of him was one of only two entrances/exits. Dark and hooded and soft-boiled under a weak blue light, it opened onto a corridor that connected Diosys to Autobase. Soon, three thousand robots would pass through its turquoise beam.

He turned at the sound of footsteps. Clipped, curt and regular – they had to be Prowl’s. Sure enough, the strategist appeared on stage, his databoard tapping a rhythm against his thigh. He was frowning, but then he was always frowning. It was as if the corners of his mouth were somehow more susceptible to Cybertron’s moderate gravity.

‘Progress report, Red Alert: how’s it going?’

‘Ask me again in four hours. If we can pull this off without incident, I think I’ll retire.’

Prowl smiled at his databoard then looked around the arena as if noticing its size for the first time. ‘2987 Autobots. Think you can squeeze them in?’

‘Logistics is your department. I just want to be sure that everyone who comes in goes out alive.’ He unclipped a communicator from his waist. ‘Everything look alright from up there?’

‘Beautiful,’ said Chromedome from a viewing gallery at the far end of the arena. ‘The spy cams are working perfectly. I can even read the small print on Prowl’s databoard.’

‘I have every faith in both of you,’ said Prowl, quickly hugging the board to his chest. ‘I know Rodimus does too. I’ll speak to you before the performance.’

Red Alert scanned the arena once more, ticking off a mental list of blind spots and weak points, ledges and crevices... he knew something was going to go wrong. Something always did.

Wheeljack’s workshop lay deep within the bowels of Autobot City, below the empty storage vaults and the maze of personal quarters. It was an oasis of junk and clutter in a desert of discipline. While the other City-dwellers trekked the globe, exploring its peaks and troughs, plodding the Yukon or climbing the Andes, he was always here, bending over pots of pale grease, swearing at a computer screen, scooping wreckage off a worktop, sifting among fuses and heat-blistered circuit boards. It was here that he felt most comfortable.

Today was an exception.

Today he slumped in his chair and stared blankly at his hands. He was experiencing a familiar sensation: the gentle sadness of moving on. His workshop was almost empty, with spare parts and loose equipment sealed inside transport boxes (Cliffjumper’s trusty glass-gun, Windcharger’s battered stealth glider, Springer’s engex patch, which he’d been using to wean himself of pure-grade petrolax). Naked tabletops blinked, surprised and embarrassed, in the light.

Soon he would be moving on, back to Cybertron, back to a caricature of a world full of aerial attacks, bombing raids, infiltration and sabotage, battlefields and blackouts.

Perhaps it was funny. After all, at least he had been prepared for Magnus’ bombshell. *With the lack of Decepticon presence on Earth and the need for more troops on Cybertron*, blah, blah blah... Autobot City was to be dismantled, stripped and stacked like the machinery in his workshop, and the Autobots who called it home would be ‘reassigned’. Despite Magnus’ tacit forewarning, Mirage’s verdict had been almost impossible to accept. Maybe some part of him, some naïve, optimistic part of him, had assumed all this would have a happy ending. As if these things ever did.

Magnus had said the move would take time, what with the galling preparations needed to uproot Metroplex and ferry him back to Cybertron. Some Autobots were handling it better than others. Grimlock had reserved a seat on the first cross-hop shuttle, eager to wedge a chair underneath the High Command roundtable. Hubcap was despondent, having only recently requested a transfer to the City. Hound was arranging for his poplars to be shared between the Witwicky’s gravestones and the controversial Beller Memorial. Then there were the administrative chores: deciding whether Autobots would end up in Autobase or Delphi, deciding which honorary Earth ranks could be maintained on Cybertron. It would all take ‘a few days’, but Wheeljack, seeing no point in waiting, had decided to start packing.

He wheeled his chair to the nearest terminal and logged in. Schematics for the Ark and the Space Bridge scored the monitor screen in green lines.

*What are they going to give me to do on Cybertron? Put up shelves in the Archive Centre?*

His optics settled on the technical data unfurling below a picture of the Space Bridge. 'It would have worked, too', he said out loud. 'It really would.'

'Not getting maudlin, are we?'

Wheeljack swivelled away from Ultra Magnus' reflection. 'I'll take that as a joke. How is everyone?'

'Surprised. Upset. Angry. Same as you and me... Centurion can't believe he'll be moving to another planet.'

'Where's Mirage?'

'With Ratchet, getting ready to go. I wouldn't like to hang around here if I were him.' Magnus replaced the electron microscope he'd been examining. 'Anyway, I just came down here to see how you were.' He gestured to Wheeljack's computer screen. 'I'd erase that if I were you. We don't want evidence of an Autobot Space Bridge falling into Decepticon hands, prototype or not.'

'Of course,' said Wheeljack quietly as he watched his commander leave his workshop. 'Right away.'

The three Decepticons lay on the operating tables like slabs of raw meat. The oil-spattered Quintesson surgeon, Ferrax, shuffled around them like a nervous diner at a buffet, wondering where to start. His hands were the colour of olives, smeared as they were with a genealogy of grime that could be traced to a thousand innards. He wore a headband full of welders and needle-lights; underneath, lubricant sprang from microscopic pores in his forehead. After a brief prayer to the Progenitors and a nod towards the wipe-clean copy of the Old Texts (he'd just re-read Book 3 and was feeling particularly vengeful), he flipped micro-instruments from his fingertips and set to work on the nearest Decepticon cerebellum. He removed a portion of the skull's outer casing and prodded the brain module.

The Decepticon convulsed, his torso heaving towards the spotlight as if trying to turn itself inside out. Ferrax shrank back until both he and the Decepticon had relaxed – until their teeth stopped chattering and their spines had reasserted themselves.

Xenon stifled a gasp of pleasure. 'I was growing bored with the operation,' he said, moving closer to the corpse. 'But that was worth waiting for. Tell me, is he dead?'

Ferrax mumbled something. His vocal synthesiser had partially eroded thanks to endless vials of battery acid (he was a binge drinker) and frowned. A corneal tic puckered the flexi-steel around his one good eye. He held his hand up to Xenon's face. A dead ball of circuitry was skewered on his fingertip.

'Excellent,' said Xenon. 'And what about the Cybertronian's body? You've left the cerebral connections intact?'

Another snuffle, another twitch.

'Good. Hooking up the new brains will be simple.'

Ferrax threw the brain module aside. It overheated as it hit the floor and was engulfed in a delicate skin of flame.

Scrawled across the slopes of Mount Kyth was a black, lipless mouth, a slanted crevice lost among thousands of similar pockmarks. Emyrissus had been laying there, pinioned between toothless steel, for nine hundred days now, a laser rifle resting between his arms. His legs had seized up through lack of movement, and he had long since abandoned any notion of comfort in favour of simply bearing the pain of immobility.

But, being a loyal little Micromaster, he accepted his circumstances without malice. After all, he'd volunteered for this assignment. Rodimus Prime had been brutally honest when briefing him: this was a dangerous mission, potentially fatal, involving long periods of tense inactivity. He would be bored. He would be isolated. He would not be allowed to contact any of his team-mates until the mission was accomplished.

And yes, it was as bad as it sounded, but the objective... assassinate Galvatron?

He'd accepted without hesitation.

He looked through the optic enhancer and saw the usual view: the east face of Darkmount (thirty miles away but appearing much closer), the dirty blue walls, the colossal Decepticon symbol, the amalgam of walkways and weapons and entrance hatches. He knew every ridge and furrow with pornographic intimacy, but one area he knew best of all – the large plexiglass window fronting Galvatron's throne room.

The window was an example of the classic hynolith design, the glass able to withstand the heaviest artillery fire. Each interlocking slat reinforced a framework of curved, diamond-shaped plexi-plates. There was only one flaw, one tiny structural hiccup: a particular pane of glass could be shattered with the right shot at right angle.

Emyrissus' entire mission hinged on this particular pane. Galvatron's skull had to be framed by the slanting latticework when the magic bullet broke the seal.

The problem, borne out over nine hundred days, was that Galvatron rarely moved from his throne; he just lounged in the darkness, lost in thoughts and daydreams. Even now, all Emyrissus could see was the outline of a forearm and forefinger.

Emyrissus often wondered what played on his target's mind. Did he concoct ambitious masterplans, baroque schemes that would bring about total Decepticon victory? Did he dream about killing his enemies or winning them over to his cause? Was he concerned with the smaller details, the friends he had lost, the sacrifices he had made in his life? Or was he just too frightened or too bored to venture from his inner sanctum?

Anyway, it was almost sunset. Practice time. He leant on his elbows to give a better view, aligned the rifle sights and drew a bead on the throne, imagining how the butt would hammer his shoulder when he finally pulled the trigger. If he fired now, though, it would be a wasted shot. From this angle, the laser would bounce harmlessly off the glass, simultaneously telling half the Decepticon army that an Autobot was hiding nearby.

Practice over, he laid down the rifle, shook his head and prepared to wait another nine hundred days.

Nightbeat rested his chin on his forearm and looked at the orb on his desk with a mixture of melancholy and nostalgia (not that the two were ever fully separate). The one remaining bulb lassoed a meagre curve of light over the orb's upper hemisphere and breathed colour into the core. Alongside him, his computer flashed the Autosymbol above the words *For Your Immediate Attention*. He was lost in concentration, so much so that the rumble outside his office sounded like a distant murmur. It seemed that everyone heading for Diosys was using his corridor as a shortcut.

There was a knock on the door.

'Nightbeat? It's Doubleheader. I think your door's jammed. The keypad's not responding.'

Nightbeat scooped up the orb and put it back inside his chest. 'It's working fine from this side,' he replied, deactivating the lock.

Doubleheader was still pressing his gun barrel against the pressure pad when the door slid open.

'Ah, there you are. I've been trying to reach you by computer for ages. Didn't you get my message?'

'My terminal's broken.' He noticed that Doubleheader had ditched his Pretender shell and vaguely wondered why. 'What do you want?'

'To see if you're coming to the troop inspection. High Command have set aside a special place for you.'

'I won't be attending. But thanks for dropping by.'

'Are you sure? Everyone's going. Well, nearly everyone - they've left a special place for Longtooth.'

'It's not my scene. Really - there are things I have to get on with. Cases.'

'I understand. I just didn't want you to feel left out.'

Doubleheader's parting words stayed with Nightbeat as he locked the door and confronted his terminal. Individuals he could deal with (just about), but not crowds. Besides, he had more pressing concerns: in four hours, when the troop inspection was over, High Command would reconvene and Rodimus would finally explain why he was here. Let the others stand in line with their polished guns and their polished smiles. Why waste time shaking hands with Autobot dignitaries when he could be in his office, slumped under a naked bulb, wondering where everything had gone wrong?

It was only daybreak, but the arena was already half full.

Thick streams of Autobots poured through the entrance and collected in large pools. Sealed in his tower, Chromedome positioned the spy cams as per Red Alert's instructions. Six laser platforms hovered

between the gallery and the stage, descending like ski lifts, barrels warming in the sun. The stage itself, which took up a fifth of the stadium, was empty except for a single lectern.

Members of Red Alert's security team hovered by the door, weapons at their hips. The 'Invisibles' – guards who avoided plain sight using Skids' light-bending Sidestep technology – were already nowhere to be seen (only a ripple of ripe light, a hiccup in the air, hinted at their location).

Prowl strode across the stage, self-aware to the point of embarrassment, and ducked into the wings. He had every faith in Rodimus Prime, but he didn't know how this troop inspection would have come together if it hadn't been for his organisational skills.

He saw Scattershot counting his Technobots; Red Alert wrestling with hand-comms, looking as though his head was about to overheat; Quickswitch mode-hopping with boredom; Vroom striding confidently through the crowd.

So many familiar faces, yet so few he could call close friends.

His true brethren, those with whom he had shared so much, were posted at Autobot City, light years away. They'd be heading home soon enough: Mirage must have delivered the verdict by now. He consulted his databoard and tried not to picture the dismay on the faces of Wheeljack, Jazz and the others. So he'd been one of the five who had voted to close down the City. So what? Why should he feel guilty?

'This is your last chance to call it off!'

Prowl looked up. Thunderclash and Rodimus Prime were standing nearby, half-hidden by scaffold.

'You just don't give up, do you?' said Rodimus.

'I am merely offering you one last chance to reverse your decision.' Thunderclash gestured off-stage. 'Look, they're not even in line yet. There's still time to—'

'Short of an asteroid heading this way or the Decepticons calling a truce, nothing's going to change my mind. Isn't it time you accepted that?'

'Something is going to go wrong, I know it.'

'Keep your voice down.'

'Don't tell me to keep my voice down! What does it take to—'

'Oh, will you both just *shut up!*'

Rodimus Prime and Thunderclash looked at Prowl for the first time.

'Now look, Prowl...'

'I don't want to hear it, Rodimus. I've had it up to here with both of you – everyone has! You!' He jabbed a finger at Thunderclash. 'Rodimus is our leader. He deserves a little respect... And you can stop smirking, Rodimus: you should be above such petty squabbles. The more you argue, the more you undermine your own authority.'

'Well,' said Thunderclash, watching Prowl storm off stage. 'I hope you're satisfied.'

And Red Alert kept fretting.

All around him, robots were settling into tidier pockets, tugged and tailored by their commanding officers. He counted a hundred, five hundred, a thousand... Not bad numbers, considering this was the first proper troop inspection since Arklaunch four million years ago.

The overall layout was simple: twenty squads, each one twelve deep and twelve wide, including a rep from High Command or some other senior officer.

As he climbed on stage, he noticed the silence: having assumed their positions, everyone had gone quiet. It reminded him of circuit-communion, when the First Ones used to lead the faithful in wide-eyed Primal prayer. That didn't happen anymore; '*Primus ist tot*' graffiti had appeared on the Golden Dome as soon as the war had broken out.

Rodimus Prime was skulking in the shadows with the rest of High Command: Kup, Prowl, Perceptor and Thunderclash. Sideswipe and Sunstreaker were there too, honorary members in the absence of Mirage and Ratchet. They looked awkward and pensive, as if waiting to collect an award.

'Everything set, Red?' asked Rodimus.

'Everything is as secure as possible. You've got the Invisibles, the laser platforms and Chromedome. If anything trips the radar I'll call things off immediately.'

'We've got nearly three thousand Autobots out there,' said Thunderclash, looking elsewhere.



‘Three thousand *armed* Autobots,’ corrected Rodimus. ‘That’s the beauty of a troop inspection: if anything happens, we’re prepared.’

Red Alert gestured to the empty stage. ‘High Command, it’s time you made your entrance.’

Prowl led the way, his databoard replaced by a semi-automatic that curled and curtsied in his gleaming bodywork. Kup was next: weather-beaten, finger-bitten, his rust-soaked edges scuffed with age. Perceptor stared at his feet and crossed the grey-gold platform in a self-conscious trot. Sideswipe was slower, weighed down by the customised quad blasters filling each fist.

Sunstreaker waited for his morph-twin to get clear of the stage before he made his entrance. It ranked among the greatest moments of his life, up there with boarding the Ark for the first time. (And that had been under cover of darkness. Only Xaaron, Skater, Maximus and a handful of admin clerks had witnessed him board the spacecraft. For years he’d been crippled by the knowledge that two million Autobots had missed his departure – for security reasons, they’d all been told that the launch ceremony was a week away.)

So Sunstreaker walked slowly, gracefully, as if balancing on air, waiting for the startled gasp of admiration and/or envy. His gold bodywork blinked coquettishly under the stage lights, catching every eye. He let the audience gorge themselves on *primus perfecto*, on the blissful collision of form and function. Somewhere out there, he was certain, seasoned warriors were blinking back energon tears at the wondrous symmetry of plate and plane.

Filed away in squad-block D3, Quark leant towards Hoist. ‘What did you say?’

‘I said Sunstreaker’s taking his time.’

Quark tried to smile but couldn’t. On his left was a small patch of ground where Rev-Tone should have been. It exerted its own gravitational pull, and every few seconds his optics succumbed to the tug.

Rodimus watched Sunstreaker take his place on stage and felt an entirely unexpected glow of nervousness. Someone nudged his back and he walked towards the lectern, a lone island in a sea of grey space. He folded his fingers over the sides of the lectern and took in the crowd for the first time. Sixty rows of Autobots stared back; they gleamed like hatchbacks in the suburban sun, taut and new and shiny. They were his men, his army, and all he could do was stare at them while they raised their arms in formal salute.

‘Autobots.’

‘I... I wish I could say that I initiated this gathering because I wanted to – I don’t know, update you on the strategic progress of the War. But my motives are far more selfish. Truth be told, I wanted to see you as you should be seen: all as one.’

‘And I wish I could say that I ordered this troop inspection to field questions, but again that would be only partially true. I wanted not just to listen, but to say something.’ He leant on the lectern. ‘I wanted to say thank you. Thank you for your loyalty and your faith – not in me, but in the Autobot cause. Article 1 of the Code provides that freedom is the right of all sentient beings. It is sobering to know that in a galaxy brought to its knees by the Empire’s Technoism, a handful of Primus’ children still hold that to be true.’

‘Seeing you all before me now, I am humbled. Each of you is essential to our cause because each of you embodies that cause – to reclaim our home, to overthrow the tyrants that would use it as an engine of destruction.’

‘And so this is *not* our darkest hour. This is not the end. We will not stand down, or back away, or cower before the Decepticon threat. Tomorrow marks the beginning of the next phase; the first step towards taking back Cybertron.’

The last syllable fizzled against 2986 audionets.

The crowd cheered.

Rodimus braced himself against the wave of adulation.

Red Alert tensed as the sound reached fever pitch, positive that halfway across Cybertron, in Polyhex, Soundwave had heard the commotion and was looking up from his desk, frowning

One member of the crowd did not cheer; there were only a couple of things that he would not do to retain his cover, and applauding Rodimus Prime for speaking out against the Decepticons was one of them. He watched the Autobot leader perch on the edge of the stage and strike another Messianic pose while

dumb, loyal, sweet-smelling Autobots massaged his ego. Five hundred years posing as an Autobot had taught him many things about the nature of the enemy, and this display of hero worship proved that old Decepticon adage: the Autobots are nothing without a leader.

No one could recall the exact time when he had surreptitiously swapped sides (1493, shortly after Cyclonus and Scourge, fleeing Death's Head, had appeared from the future). Casual lapses of memory like these helped people forget his 'foolish' Decepticon dalliance. He was trusted. In fact, some of the Autobots in his squad – Jackpot, Scissor, Rumbler, Rearguard – trusted him with their lives. That was the good thing about being a Decepticon: you had a natural talent for deception.

*Remain undercover until you are in a position to assassinate the Autobot leader.*

The mission was simple but, over the years, the specifics had changed. Kill Fortress Maximus became Kill Xaaron, then Kill Triax, then Kill Optimus, then Kill Rodimus. It had taken five hundred years of selective murder (Autobot and Decepticon) and lies of breathtaking audacity to keep his secret undisclosed, to climb quietly up the ranks. Second-in-command of a respected SAR squad, he sometimes wondered whether he could have made it to squad leader or even High Command.

That wouldn't happen now, of course. Not after today.

The cheering stopped. Rodimus Prime stepped off stage flanked by Thunderclash and Red Alert and began walking between the squad-blocks, shaking hands.

Emyrisus did not know why Galvatron chose that precise moment to leave his throne, but within 0.17 seconds of doing so a scalding red dot was searching for the Decepticon's neural cluster.

He slid his finger around the ultra-sensitive trigger. The metal nuzzled his knuckled joint and begged for pressure, and as soon as Galvatron stepped in front of the weakened plexiglass he was quartered by crosshairs. The Decepticon leader was talking into his arm, into some sort of communicator or remote control. Another half step, a shrug of forward gesture, and he would become vulnerable.

And then it happened.

Emyrisus lowered his rifle and stared at the empty throne room, stunned by what he had just seen.

Loosening his grip, Rodimus gave Vroom a parting smile and moved a step onwards. The Pretender's second-in-command was waiting with an open hand.

'I think this is a great idea,' said Doubleheader. 'You should do it more often.'

Prime took his hand.

'Thank you. It's good to know I'm doing something right.' His smile flickered a little as Doubleheader tightened his grip.

'It's good that you take the time to see the troops, you know? The people that actually do all the hard work.'

The laugh was a little too late and a little too loud.

'Yes, well, we all have our part to play.' He heard Doubleheader say something else and leant forward, frowning. 'What was that?'

'I asked if you've every wondered what it would feel like to die.'

'Excuse me?' Rodimus looked down at his hand and saw the shining badge on Doubleheader's forearm. 'Your Autobrand – it's fake.'

Doubleheader's chest split open to reveal something unnatural, something wedged between a fuel pump and a block of energon ducts.

Red Alert yelled 'Bomb!'

Rodimus tried to break away.

Everyone within earshot reached for their rifles.

Doubleheader smiled. It was a proud smile, a sad smile.

Something you thought dead is only sleeping.

**Neil Hannon, *Intifada***

‘That night I suffered a vision of Primus Himself, resplendent in His finery. He was not as the Pentateuch described Him. Thousands of wires were pouring from His stomach, and a tri-spiked crown sat atop His head. One of His hands was twisted and clawed. In place of the other was the barrel of a gun.

When He spoke, it was unlike any sound I had ever heard; when He spoke, I was afraid.

Between the rush of binary and the hum of clashing digits I discerned a message; an entreaty. He told me of something called ‘formchange’, a method of reconfiguration so physical, so immediate, that the bodyshell itself is recast. He spoke of empowerment and the Gift of Transformation, and when I awoke I found I had sketched something across my recharge suite. A diagram. A blueprint. I know that my hand did not move of its own volition: it was driven. It was possessed.

Underneath the sketch, one word: morphcore.’

**Extract from Megatron’s pre-war journals, ‘*My Struggle*’  
(Banned under the Council’s Incitement to Riot Act, 1st Cycle 549)**

‘No Decepticons.’

**Sign outside Maccadam’s New Oil House, circa 4.1 million years BC**

PART TWO

*a posteriori*

Four million years ago, when the war was progressing from infancy (tantrums, spittle, tears) to adolescence (lethargy, pessimism, melodrama), there was only one God, and His name was Primus.

Before Creationism, before Epistemological breakaway sects, before Cults of the Meta-realm, before the Ultimate Warrior, before Little Earthers and clone-cultures and Evopeakers, before Servion and the Brotherhood, before Combat Disciplines such as Metallikato and Circuit-Su and Crystalocution, before it all got so *confusing*, the Laws of Primus were all that mattered. Primus was Everything and Everything was Primus. Cybertron's Promised Land was Lonium, a small city-state protected by the Neutrality Agreement, famous for its Temple of Knowledge and its High Circuitmaster, Boltax.

Following the actions of a young Autobot lieutenant and the founder of the Decepticon movement, the Temple of Knowledge was razed to the ground. Boltax was killed along with legions of his disciples. The Autobots had breached the Agreement and Megatron eventually secured the region.

The few remaining disciples fled and secularism swept across the planet. As time passed, faith in a benign Creator was lost, and Primus, Unicron and the supporting cast (the Last Autobot, the Keeper, the Pentacore, the Covenant *et al*) became part of a colourful but deliberately remote folklore. A nut-and-bolt nihilism diluted Cybertronian culture, until only a handful of old timers like Protomede and Alpha Trion practised the ascetic way of life described in the Primal Pentateuch. It was these old timers, these ancient whiskey-priests and god-lovers, who knuckled down and formed the Circuit Sects.

The Great Exodus, when the Cybertronian Empire abandoned the planet, and its aftermath, the Straxian Holocaust, claimed the lives of many Neutrals, Empties, pacifists and ascetics, and soon only a few Circuit Sects remained. And while Unicron's attacks in 1991 and 2006 should have rekindled faith in the Primal Prophecies and the Omega Point, the existence of 'Dark Gods' and 'Light Gods' was explained in scientific terms, in trite tracts and formulas devised, with lab-like detachment, by a new breed of radical theoscientists.

There were still some areas of doubt, however: the Matrix remained unknowable, the Eugenesis Code indecipherable.

And no one – *no one* – dared use the Killswitch.

By 2006, the First Church of the Primal Trinity had become the last Circuit Sect. An architectonic cult formed after the Great Schism of 3<sup>rd</sup> Cycle 198 to prepare for the Second Coming, the First Church studied the divine revelations of Primon and the Cybertronic Triumvirate: Primus, the Last Autobot and the Creation Matrix. Optimus Prime himself had called upon them on many occasions, the most recent being in 1994, when they had helped to interpret apocalyptic premonitions. Since then, the 70 disciples had settled in a disused temple in Lonium, on the edge of the Acid Wastes. Only now, in late December 2012, was it beginning to feel like home.

The temple itself was squat and straddled, but it did its best: it tried vainly to smarten and spruce, to correct its sagging posture. Its pre-Grapplean architecture – fussy and wrinkled, like loosening skin – trapped more shadows than sun.

Inside, archways met furtively among darkened eaves, groping for mutual support. Seven circular windows ran down the two longest walls and channelled light through spirals of tinted glass. Between each

window were statues of the Primal genealogy, Primon through to Rodimus; they stared blankly at each other across the pews, their expressions as unreadable as the scripture beneath their feet:

//wo1>z.z\*src.z t-^/011>z.y\*src.z t->z.x\*src//:pt.z t->x.z\*drc/.x+ t->x.y\*src.x+

The centre aisle connecting the altar to the double doors was engraved with six overlapping circles, each one depicting a Cybertronian Epoch. The circle in front of the altar mirrored the details in the stained-glass window above it. The temple had been positioned with Alpha Centauri in mind: before Cybertron abandoned its original orbit, the noonday sun would strike the tintured plexi and infuse the floor with colour. Even now, at a certain time (and with a degree of artistic leniency), the sunlight would seek the weft and weave of chiselled parquet and Primon would extricate himself from Cybertron's crust.

A Decepticon symbol marked the centre of the second circle, which resembled a clock face. At one o'clock stood a robot, at eleven o'clock a crude Cybertronian vehicle. The images were linked by the various permutations of transformation, step-by-step snapshots of form-change and mech-meld.

Circle three had countless Cyberworlds arranged in a double helix; on either side, gelatinous protoforms sprang half-formed and spineless from bulging, spastic torsos.

The fourth epoch depicted Unicron's multiple attacks and defeats, Emirate Xaaron's ascension to Primal avatar and the apparent cleansing of Cybertron by the Last Autobot.

The sixth circle was crowded with representations of violent biomorphism and curvaceous animal shapes - evocations of fur, fleece and tendon.

Only the fifth circle was blank: it was the only circle, the only Epoch, that the sect would not touch.

Circle five was reserved for the Second Coming, and applying artistic license to their core belief was tantamount to blasphemy. Through careful reading of the Primal prophecies, the First Church knew that Primus would return, but it was a vague deadline. Sometime after Unicron's third coming and before the rise of the Neogens, He would walk among his creations as one of them: God in robot.

Unicron's defeat in 2010 marked the end of the Fourth Epoch and, by default, the beginning of the Fifth. The First Churchers holed themselves up in their temple and began two years of transcendental meditation and energon deprivation. They dissected the Pentateuch: every verse, every syllable, every rubbery morpheme was grabbed and probed.

Finally, they got what they wanted: a sign. One day in late 2012 it appeared out of nowhere, balancing on the altar, hunched and humble: the legendary Eye of Cybertron.

They thought the Eye was growing at first, but no one could be sure. After a few days the High Circuitmaster forbade direct observation, and the few who dared to glance at the centre spoke in hushed tones of the infinity within. No one was allowed near the altar in case they heard the Voice of God, deafening and impossible - the strum and stutter of pure sentience.

So the disciples did not look and they did not go near. While the Eye pulsed with the rhythmic purity of a heartbeat, while it wrapped itself in entropy and surface skim and strips of arcing light, they gave thanks to God and celebrated.

Twenty days later, and the celebrations were still continuing. The temple was alive with furious worship. Kneeling worshippers were caressed by energy that curled from the Eye like pith, while others filled the pews and babbled incoherently, their voices bright and childlike.

The High Circuitmaster and his clergy gathered around the fifth circle, enraptured by the pinch of electricity in the air. They hammered the floor with their staffs, creating cracks and spidery fissures. Energy radiated from their optics and, finally, the circular plate shattered.

The High Circuitmaster fell to his knees, aghast at his vandalism (he half-expected a lightning bolt to slag him there and then). He inspected the damage. When his subordinates removed the loosened plates, they found something poking through the underlay, something small and golden and somehow significant.

It was more than a Sign. It was more than an Omen.

It was the tip of a finger.

Mirage was pacing - in fact he was hyper-pacing, if there was such a thing. He was striding up and down the Autoshuttle's disembarkation ramp, arms pinned behind his back, and scowling 'til his face ached.

He liked pacing. It was one of the only Earthen habits he could understand: the jittery impatience, the compulsion to keep moving, the anger implied with every stride.

Where the hell was Ratchet, anyway? Probably chatting to Windcharger or Gears, swapping old Earth-stories. He hated stories – he just didn't see the point of them. Actions speak louder than words, he always said.

Ah, *there* he was, with Bluestreak, Hound, Trailbreaker and Wheeljack.

'Where have you been?'

'Calm down, Mirage. I was just saying goodbye to the others.'

*Why bother?* Mirage thought to himself. *You'll be seeing them all soon enough.* He took a few steps up the ramp and hovered.

'Hound, Trailbreaker and Bluestreak will accompany you to Cybertron,' explained Wheeljack as the robots in question filed into the shuttle. He groped for something else to say, something to make his statement less abrupt, but found nothing.

For the first time, Ratchet felt indignant. Why should he shoulder the blame for High Command's decision? He opened his mouth to speak but thought better of it. These people were about to be evicted. He didn't envy them, or begrudge their anger.

'Look, you know I'm sorry about this. Who knows? Perhaps one day, when the war's over, we can build another city on Earth.'

'Somehow, Ratchet, I doubt that will happen.' Ultra Magnus was leaning against the hangar door. 'You're off, then,' he said steadily.

'That's right. Thanks for your hospitality,' said Mirage flatly.

'Always nice to entertain High Command. Good to know the Resistance is in such capable hands.'

The hangar bay doors opened and a damp wind mingled with the purr of the Autoshuttle's engines. Mirage looked at the dull daylight outside and said, 'Let's go. I've had enough of this planet.'

Ratchet watched the Intelligence Officer disappear into the shuttle. 'I'm sorry,' he said to no one in particular. 'He's been very... uptight lately.'

'Don't apologise,' said Ultra Magnus. 'Just have a safe journey home.'

Wheeljack pulled Magnus away as the shuttle powered up, swung 360 degrees and rocketed out of the hangar. It was only as the roar of its engines had subsided that Ultra Magnus heard Blaster's voice coming from his wrist communicator. 'Yes Blaster, what it is it?'

'I've got Prowl on sub-space. He needs to speak to you immediately. He says he has some bad news.'

Ultra Magnus sprinted towards the Command Tower, relishing the prospect of this particular confrontation. It was somehow fitting that it should be there, where he had confessed his fears of the City's closure, that Prowl should choose to tell him officially. He took the lift this time, and burst into the room to see Prowl's face already on the central monitor.

'Well? What the hell are you playing at?'

'Ultra Magnus, I—'

'You decided to close the City days ago!'

'Magnus—'

'How dare you patronise me by sending Mirage to "inspect" us! Haven't you got anything better to do than shut down peaceful Autobot outposts? Typical High Command ignorance!' Ultra Magnus realised that he was holding his clenched fists out in front of him – all his aggression, all his frustration, poured into a single gesture.

'Have you quite finished?' said Prowl. 'Because right now I don't give a damn about Autobot City, or the troops posted there, or you. And it's funny you should criticise High Command, because at this moment in time two of them are dying and the third is already dead.'

Magnus lowered his fists. 'What's happened?'

'The troop inspection. Doubleheader was a double agent – he was wired to a body-bomb. It exploded when he and Rodimus were shaking hands and his grip reached a certain pressure.'

For the first time, Magnus noticed the burns and scratches disfiguring the side of Prowl's face.

'Rodimus is dead?'

'No. He's hooked up to life-support in AMC1. Red Alert's in there too. What's left of him, anyway.'

'But... but you said someone in High Command had been *killed*.'

‘Thunderclash. He put himself between Prime and the bomb. He didn’t make it.’ Prowl’s eyes flashed for the first time. ‘He was vaporised. We can’t even find a body.’

Ultra Magnus was suddenly aware; aware of the freezing desk, the weak sunlight on his bodywork, the hum of the City’s temperamental defence systems, the celluloid sheen of Prowl’s paintwork. And somewhere, forced to the periphery of his mind, was the conversation he was having.

‘Ultra Magnus, I need you to send Ratchet and Mirage back to Iacon immediately. It’s essential that Ratchet operate on Rodimus as soon as possible. Without him, I don’t think – I don’t know if—’

‘They’re on their way.’

‘Good. I’ll keep you informed of any developments.’

The picture collapsed, and Ultra Magnus wondered how he would deliver the second batch of bad news that morning.

‘Galvatron, this is Soundwave requesting permission to enter.’

He jabbed the keypad, still half-expecting the throne room doors to yield. Nothing. He’d sprinted sixteen levels to get here, summoned – actually summoned – by Galvatron for the first time in years. He stretched his legs to cool his servos and a dozen cameras tracked his movement.

He was getting old. He was reaching that dangerous mechanical age when no amount of refits and energon-boosts could counteract encroaching systems shutdown. Not even Fulcrum or Sygnet could stop the inner rot, the slow decay of ancient cerebral processors. Before too long the brain module would simply pause, shrug, and admit defeat.

‘I repeat: this is Soundwave, requesting permission to enter.’

He decided to ignore protocol and initiate a mind-sweep. True, he’d never been able to actually read Galvatron’s mind (thanks, it would seem, to some sort of Unicronian Mind-gap that doubled as a mental block), but at least he could detect its presence – at least he could pounce on the swerving pulse of electro-neurons. He attuned his scanning circuitry to detect the slightest electrical shift and was bombarded with life-pulses from the six thousand other Decepticons in the vicinity. He stared at the floor and rubbed his temples, narrowing the field...

Galvatron was gone.

He retreated to a safe distance, unclipped his concussion blaster and destroyed the throne room doors. Concealed weaponry peppered the corridor, as expected. He took three strides towards the doorway, transformed into a cassette player and passed unscathed through the crackling web. He landed on his feet and shut down the lasers from the inside.

The throne room was empty.

This surprised him; he’d expected to find Galvatron slumped on the throne, smoke rising from a grinning neck cavity and a warm gun resting at his feet. (The platform-worker-turned-psychoanalyst Rung had candidly admitted that suicide was Galvatron’s inevitable fate – after all, he was displaying the classic signs of mental disorder: a grandiose appraisal of his own past and future, delusional belief in his own invulnerability, extreme paranoia... not that these things didn’t apply to *every* Decepticon leader.)

Soundwave spun slowly on his heels, checking every crack and crevice. Even if Galvatron hadn’t committed suicide, even if he’d simply succumbed to some major malfunction, some side effect of his Unicronian creation (a sub-set of cannibalistic nanobots, perhaps, or a slow-burning mechavirus), there had to be a body somewhere...

But no, the throne room was indeed empty. A second mindscan failed to locate Galvatron anywhere in a six-mile radius. Soundwave sat on the steps of the throne and waited to see which emotion – anxiety or excitement – won him over.

And then he realised what had happened: Galvatron had time-jumped. Again. He’d probably used a handheld trigger device and dived headlong into the time-stream, swimming towards some unspecified point.

He shook his head in disbelief, realising why his commander had been so introverted of late: he had been planning something. He wondered why and where, but mostly *when*. The Exodus? Arklaunch? The Golden Age? Or perhaps even further back, before any of the current generation even existed, before records began, before the archivists and scholars began putting hand to page, fingertip to keyboard: the fabled Eugenesis Era, named after the most controversial program-code in Transformer history; a near-

mythical period, beloved by old-school theoscientists, when the holy moulds for Primon and the First Ones had been set and left to cool; when the divine energies of Primus still swirled across a brand new planet.

He wondered what alterations would Galvatron make to the space-time fabric, what 'minor' tweaks and tucks he had in mind. He imagined stepping outside to see that Cybertron was golden, or looking at the sky to see three moons, or realising that his aching servos no longer ached. Except no one knew if it worked like that. Not anymore. Not since the Time Wars.

He stiffened at the sound of nearby gunfire. Misfire, Snapdragon and Slugslinger rushed into the room and saluted when they saw his raised concussion blaster.

'Before you ask,' said Soundwave, 'he's gone. Time-jumped.'

'You think the Autobots are behind this?' asked Slugslinger.

'I doubt it. Galvatron has done this of his own volition. For the moment I recommend that — wait.' He pressed his temple. 'Security has just detected an Autobot within range. My sensors indicate...' He pointed at the window. 'He's over there! On the mountainside!'

Soundwave retracted the window, allowing Misfire and Slugslinger to leap into the wind-rush and morph into aircraft mode. He watched their rear thrusters shrink as they approached Mount Kyth.

'Perhaps I spoke too soon,' he said to Snapdragon, settling into the throne. 'Contact Sixshot and tell him there's been a shift in power. Tell him I am in command.' He looked at the statues sulking in the shadows and wondered if it was time to be measured up.

Nightbeat climbed on stage to get a better look, but gangs of surveyors and analysts still obscured his view. They combed the ground, absorbed to the point of obsession, like sixty people looking for a contact lens. The arena floor was smeared with oil and flashburn and gluey blue lubricant. The actual cater screamed in silence, an open mouth ringed with ash.

He had to admit that he wasn't entirely surprised by what had happened. In a way, he wondered how the assassination attempt could have been avoided – by taking time out beforehand to interrogate every attendee for telltale signs of Decepticon sympathies? By scouring the legendary High Command blacklist (criteria for inclusion: past Decepticon affiliation, pro-Technoist political views, open support of Grimlock's 'No [Autobot] Code' campaign)? By hooking up every single trooper to Wheeljack's lie detector and bombarding them with questions about Xerxes and Slaughter City, about the Vos/Tarn space race, about the Creation Ceremony in 3<sup>rd</sup> Cycle 270, Squadron 117 and other emotive Decepticon subjects, looking for that telltale electroline flutter?

No, there was no way to weed out double agents with a few loaded questions. This tragedy was no one's fault except Doubleheader's, although if Red Alert ever regained consciousness, Nightbeat knew that he'd disagree.

Prowl had contacted him shortly after the explosion and asked him to get to Diosys ASAP. He'd had to push past streams of shell-shocked Autobots to reach the eye of the storm.

Chaos.

Medics were ferrying injured troops away while Red Alert's security team tried to keep order; one of the Invisibles was missing, presumed dead, but no one knew where to start looking for him. Autobots were shouting at each other or sitting with their heads in their hands. Prowl was just standing at the lectern, his face a mess, shouting out orders that everyone ignored.

Nightbeat remembered seeing Rodimus Prime and Red Alert's bodies being stretchered away from a fresh crater. Rodimus was barely recognisable. One dull optic glimmered in a mass of scrunched circuitry, an upper row of teeth sign-posting the end of his face. The lower portion of his body was missing.

Red Alert had fared little better. His left arm had been reduced to a scorched and stunted javelin, and as for the rest of his torso – well, it may as well have been scooped and hollowed.

The crowd only started moving when the med-teams had carried their cargo out of sight. It suddenly became noisy again, but it was bomb noise, trauma noise – aching and snappy and tiring. Nightbeat had waded towards the stage, through the nervous chatter, through the grimaces and grief. Pointblank had grabbed him en route and stammered something about *hearing* the explosion, about Prime being dead *because* of the explosion, about being hurled across the arena by the *force* of the explosion. Nightbeat had stopped, and nodded, and moved on.



Now, with the crowds fully dispersed and only the science teams and the closet necrophiles left, the arena seemed to be holding its breath. He ducked under a metal cordon and balanced on the rim of the crater. Charon and Galatea were poking about in the dry slush below.

'It was one hell of an explosion,' said Galatea, as if that was what Nightbeat had come to confirm. 'Seemed to go deep rather than wide, though.'

'Just as well,' said Nightbeat, 'or I'd have four hundred bodies to look for and not just one.'

Charon flipped his visor and squinted at the sky. 'So what do you think happened to Thunderclash? Surely there should be some trace of him.'

'You wanted to see me, Nightbeat?' Chromedome walked up, shielding his eyes against the sun. 'I think I know what this is about: the security cameras, right?'

'Right. How many were you using?'

'Twelve. And yes, I've watched all the footage. There are no clear shots of Thunderclash with Doubleheader.'

'Surely one of them picked up something.'

'They were positioned at roughly equal intervals around the arena and trained on different flashpoints – areas which Red Alert deemed insecure like the entrance and exit, the stage, the sky. There was no way we could record every part of the floor simultaneously.'

'So what footage have you got?'

'Of the explosion? Well, all twelve cameras record the flash. One was slagged, three caught part of the crater. Lots of smoke and flame. Perceptor thinks that the explosion ruptured an underground cable and triggered a chain reaction.'

Nightbeat picked up a random metal plate. 'If Thunderclash has been atomised, I can't work out how. The explosion wasn't that powerful. And if he'd simply been blown apart, Galatea's team would have found components by now.'

He held up the slab of metal to accentuate his point, and as he did so there was a sudden, soundless flash on the far wall of the arena: the metal plate was bouncing sunlight to another reflective surface. The light jumped and shuddered as he moved the plate side to side. Only one angle gave direct flashback.

'What is it, Nightbeat?'

'Maybe nothing.' He walked across the arena and began searching for handholds in the wall.

Galatea climbed out of the crater to see Nightbeat scaling the far wall as if escaping a maximum-security compound. 'Chromedome, what in Prime's name is he doing?'

'God knows. Go and give him a hand.'

Nightbeat detached the winking object from the ledge, peered awkwardly over his back and wondered how he would get down with one hand. The answer arrived in the form of Galatea, who had transformed into jet mode and was hovering within reach. Nightbeat clutched the wobbling wing and was lowered to safety. Chromedome was waiting.

'Well? What is it?'

Nightbeat studied the rectangular object with archaeological care. 'What do you *think* it is?'

'Full complement of troops now on board, Lord Xenon. Hyperspatial co-ordinates set, warp thrusters primed. The Conquest is ready to depart.'

'Excellent, Quantax.' Xenon turned to the second colossal screen. 'What about you, Rodern?'

'Ready and waiting,' said Rodern from the bridge of the Enslaver. 'My troops are spoiling for a fight.'

'Good. They'll get one. You will both keep me informed of your progress via the subspace link. Quantax: Sevax, Jolup and Ryknia will act as your lieutenants. They will initiate the second phase once the planet is secured. Rodern, your troops will bolster the homeworld squads once you have levelled the fortress. I will then christen the homeworld and load the Cargo. *Then As Now*, remember?'

Quantax stretched to his full height. 'We shall not fail you, Imperial Majestrix. The future of our race is assured.'

On the opposite screen, Rodern shook his head in disbelief. 'Can't you see he's being sarcastic, Xenon?'

'He is being patriotic!'

‘In that case,’ said Rodern, ‘I’ll be walking on a plateau of Cybertronian corpses by dawn.’ He stared, glassy-eyed, into the middle distance. ‘And a new era of greatness will begin!’

‘Just... just go,’ said Xenon, and blanked the screens.

The two warcruisers, the Conquest and the Enslaver, peeled themselves away from Aquaria’s orbit towards a corridor of space that rippled like hot backseat plastic. Distant star fields bent out of shape, suns stretched into molten string, a pinprick of light became a yawning portal, and the black Quintesson motherships crossed into hyperspace.

‘Sygnet?’

Blitzwing stepped into the repair bay and nearly short-circuited in shock. In front of him, propped up against a wall of arc welders, cortex dismantlers and laser rods, were the head and shoulders of Scourge. His head was as hollow as an Easter egg, cradling empty space and a swirling drone. His optic sockets smouldered like fresh bullet wounds. But it was okay, it was all right: he was just off-line.

The Triple Changer cursed himself for his jumpiness and ventured further into the room.

He didn’t like this place, with its pots of paint and its zombified Decepticons. Twenty-six years ago he’d stumbled upon the secret lab, now long-since bricked-up, and discovered Lord Straxus’ contingency plan, Project: Rebirth. That poor trooper – Skywarp’s morph-twin, Lancer – had been stripped to his endoskeleton and nailed – *nailed* – to a circuit-slab in preparation.

Sygnet had been in charge.

According to Fulcrum, he’d foregone the anaesthetic and pumped Lancer with Syk (and cheap, rough-cut Syk at that, mixed with sour petrolax and battery acid) before building a replica of Megatron’s bodyshell around his trembling limbs. The operation had taken six days. Sygnet was a sick, twisted creature – which was surprising, all things considered.

‘Sygnet?’ His voice was soft (he didn’t want to disturb the engineer in mid-operation). There was no reply, just the distant fuzz of sparks. ‘Sygnet? I need to talk to you.’

Litter-strewn steps led to a closed door and a slab of boiled neon that read *Operation in Progress. Do not enter*. Underneath, lasered into the wall, was an addendum that read, *Except Galvatron, obviously*.

Blitzwing pressed his audio receptor against the door, shrugged, and pushed it open. Sygnet’s sanctum was waxy and tubular, like an inner ear. Ancient worktops were covered in tools, some designed using the latest Decepticon technology, and others no more sophisticated than a blunt needle. The floor was worn down by millions of years of tread and pressure. Each dip and dent marked the beginning of one of Sygnet’s rambling anecdotes about his operations. He would point to a scratch on the floor and say, ‘That’s where Scorponok was fitted with shoulder-turrets,’ or ‘See that mark? That’s where Megatron first tested his electro-axe attachment,’ or ‘Those holes in the ceiling? Oh, that’s where I winched Straxus’ head into his life-support machine.’

Standing in the centre of the room under a cone of mustard light was Scourge’s body, minus his head and shoulders. Poking out of the chest wound, bound by chain, were Sygnet’s feet.

Blitzwing rapped on the door retrospectively. The sparks stopped and there was a muffled, ‘Hello?’

‘Sygnet, it’s me. Soundwave wants us in the throne room.’

The chain rattled as Sygnet winched himself upwards. The light caught the dark cockpit that sloped from his chest to his midriff and clipped the wing-fins on his shoulder blades. He was holding a scalpel in one hand and remote control in the other.

‘Oh, hi Blitzwing. Didn’t quite catch what you said.’

Blitzwing repeated himself.

‘Since when has Soundwave had the throne room to himself?’

‘Since Galvatron time-jumped.’

‘And why have we been summoned?’

‘Dunno. Maybe Soundwave wants to brag about his new position.’

‘You think so? That’s not like him.’ Sygnet disentangled his ankles, stood upright and clicked his finger-joints back into place, a habit that annoyed even the most patient Decepticon. ‘Let’s go see what he wants.’

‘What about Scourge?’

‘He’s not going anywhere,’ said Sygnet, flicking off the light.

They found Slugslinger and Misfire in a nearby corridor, their bodies limp with laser burn.

'I hope you two won't be visiting me later,' said Sygnet.

Slugslinger looked himself over, as if noticing the damage for the first time. 'You think *this* is bad? You should see the other guy.'

'We've just chased an Autobot spy halfway across Cybertron,' explained Misfire. 'I reckon it was him that killed the boss.'

'How did he manage that then?' asked Blitzwing gamely. 'And where's the body?'

There was a pause while Misfire reconsidered. 'I dunno. I don't think we'll find out now, either.'

'We've just killed the little bastard. Shot him down over the Iaconian border.' Slugslinger roared with laughter.

Sygnet nudged Blitzwing and they slipped away, leaving the Targetmasters to work off their post-battle rush.

The throne room was unusually bright when they arrived. Lights that were usually turned to low-watt and zero-glare were cranked to maximum burn, dragging each detail kicking and screaming out of the shadows. Soundwave was nowhere to be seen, but the room was crowded with early arrivals: Razorclaw, Cyclonus, Platinum, Ramjet, Roadblock, Krok, Motormaster, Pounce, Fulcrum and Onslaught. The leader of the Combaticons was reprimanding Swindle and Vortex.

Cyclonus made a beeline for Sygnet. 'How is he?'

'Scourge? Believe me, Fulcrum and I are doing our best.'

'Come on, Sygnet! It's not as if he was teetering on the brink of stasis-shutdown. It was just a chest wound.'

'A chest wound that ruptured 70% of his neuranet. And by the way, Cyclonus, it's looking more and more likely that the damage was self-inflicted. It's like he detonated a low-yield body-bomb, something just potent enough to take him off-line.'

'Then why are you taking so long to rebuild him?'

'Look, if Scourge was a normal Decepticon he'd be on his feet by now, but he isn't normal. He's not the Thundercracker I used to know. Like you, his techno-biology is horrifically advanced. It's like repairing a hyperdrive with tweezers and a blowtorch, you know? I don't have the right tools.'

'Sounds like an excuse to me.' Cyclonus nudged Sygnet's chin with his knuckles. 'If it was anyone else...'

Sygnet was knocked off balance by a robot pushing past. 'Watch where you're going, Swindle!'

'Aw, shut up!'

'Don't worry about him,' said Onslaught, wandering over. 'He's just spent five days in the Stanixian pools with Vortex and the Stunticons. We got word that the Autobots were stockpiling munitions there.'

Sygnet shrugged. 'And?'

'Nothing. We'd been tricked.'

'Misinformation, eh? Autobots can be so underhand.'

'That's rich coming from you.'

Soundwave shut everyone up simply by walking into the room. He slipped onto the throne and – although no one could see it behind his mouth plate – smiled at the crowd. 'No doubt you all think you're here because of Galvatron's disappearance. Wrong. Galvatron is his own master. He can take care of himself. I've called you here because of something far more pressing: a signal we've been awaiting for five hundred years.' He looked at Onslaught, Platinum and Motormaster. 'Some of you had not yet been created when Doubleheader "defected" to the Autobots using Sygnet's fake Autobrand. Some of you actually believed that our so-called turncoat had actually sided with the enemy.'

'At 0280 micro-cycles yesterday, Doubleheader activated his body-bomb, simultaneously transmitting a homing signal that allowed the Comms team to pinpoint his last location: the Diosys arena, a few miles from the Helio Generator Complex.'

'That's the site of the old Archives Centre,' said Platinum. 'I was right. They did go underground.'

'So it would seem. And if we've received Doubleheader's signal, it means that Rodimus is dead, and that the Autobots are in disarray. So gather your squads: we leave for Iacon in one day.'

The cloaked Autoshuttle eluded even the most sophisticated radar as it skimmed over North America. Bluestreak double-checked the co-ordinates of the sub-space portal while Hound, in the other cockpit seat, stared at the blurred carpet of greenery below.

'I think I'll miss the views more than anything,' he said. 'Even Cybertron in its Golden Age couldn't match this place.'

'I don't think Mirage would agree,' said Bluestreak, peering over his shoulder to make sure that the robot in question was still sitting at the back of the bridge, out of earshot.

The shuttle peeled away from the forest to begin its ascent. Hound turned to his co-pilot. 'I can't believe that we're leaving Earth. We've been on this planet, one way or another, for over four million years.'

'Where do you want to be posted?' asked Bluestreak. 'Back on Cybertron, I mean. We won't all be assigned to Autobase.'

'I might put in a request to go to the Sonic Canyons. Serve with Siren for a while. You?'

'Well, there's talk of re-opening the Manganesian Autobase, the one underneath Novum Kahn. It would be nice to form part of the new team, perhaps even be part of the command unit up there.'

'It would be strange if we were all separated,' said Hound as he took the controls and leant towards the back of the shuttle. 'We'll be accelerating in minus ten,' he called. 'You'd better strap yourselves in.' He turned towards the horizon, ready to initiate the ignition sequence. 'On my signal, Bluestreak. Five, four, three... what in Primus' name...? Abort! Abort!' His fingers pummelled the keyboard. 'What's happening to the sun? It looks like it's melting!'

'That's not the sun,' said Bluestreak. 'I think it's a warp gate.'

'Impossible,' said Mirage, running to the cockpit. 'We only asked for a sub-space portal.'

'It's not ours,' said Bluestreak. 'It's a hyperspatial exit point. And there's some sort of spacecraft coming through.'

Mirage checked the radar. 'We're still cloaked, right Hound? Let's move in and have a closer look.'

The Enslaver's underbelly became more pronounced as they approached; pinpricks of light expanded into huge windows. Hound pitched the shuttle at a 45-degree angle so that its nose was almost nudging the docking bays passing overhead.

'It's not Decepticon,' confirmed Bluestreak. 'And I'm guessing from Mirage's expression that it's not a present from High Command.'

The warcruiser rocketed away before Mirage could reply, knocking the Autoshuttle aside with its slipstream.

'It's heading due south,' said Hound.

Mirage leaned on the pilot seats. 'Follow it.'

'Want to hear something worrying?' asked Trailbreaker, poring over the navi-screens near the back. 'If that spacecraft maintains its course it will reach Autobot City in nine minutes.'

'Radio ahead,' ordered Ratchet. 'Warn Magnus.'

'It's just dropped below cloud level,' said Bluestreak. 'God knows what the humes are making of it.'

'Magnus is placing the City on blue alert,' announced Trailbreaker, pulling off his headset. 'He'll activate the defence net if the new arrival shows any signs of hostility.'

The Autoshuttle darted underneath the Enslaver and matched its speed so precisely that for a moment both spacecraft seemed to freeze.

'A little closer,' said Mirage, 'and I'll initiate a structural scan. I'm not risking a handshake at this stage.' The shuttle moved closer to the underbelly. 'You're almost there, Hound. A little bit closer...'

Q-537 blinked, but the red light was still there, flashing politely on his screen.

'General Rodern,' he barked into his mouthpiece, 'an unidentified object has broken the perimeter shield. I'm registering sustained contact on subsection 101001. Yes sir, that's directly underneath us.'

The Quintesson looked at the picture on screen. All he could see was a portion of the Enslaver's distended underbelly and a patch of blue sky. 'The spycam's got nothing, sir. Could be a glitch... Yes sir, the nearest laser port is concealed in subsection 021076. Shall I—? Immediately, sir.'

‘What was that?’

Mirage did not look up from the scanner screen. ‘What was what?’

‘Something fell off the ship. It looked like – ah. I see.’ Hound nudged his co-pilot. ‘They’ve seen us.’

A laser cannon had been lowered from the Enslaver’s underbelly, and was pointing at the hovering shuttle.

Bluestreak veered away, but it was too late: two thin laser bolts lunged through the Autosshuttle’s viewscreen and punched holes in the rear doors. The shuttle wobbled on its axis and dragged a trembling wingtip along the warcruiser before a second blast, brief but confident, gouged furrows along the fuselage.

Hound panicked, cut all power, and the shuttle dropped like a stone. Its rear doors peeled off their hinges as it nose-dived towards the ground.

Hound could not hear himself screaming, but felt it safe to assume that his voice was trapped in some sound pocket between the wind-rush and the gusts of grit.

*This isn’t what happens,* he thought.

*This is the part where I reactivate the auto-systems and save the day.*

He looked at his useless arms – two slabs of quivering steel pinned to the dashboard – and then the monitor. They were heading for a human settlement – a city. He imagined the Autosshuttle exploding across a plate-glass landscape, decapitating buildings.

*So this is it. Not only are we going to die, we’re going to kill thousands of humans at the same time.*

Through the Autosshuttle’s butchered windscreen he saw cabs, billboards, traffic lights and potholes – and then the picture slid away. The shuttle had flipped sideways and was flying between the skyscrapers. Cars crashed, people looked up from their soggy burgers and trees clawed at the warm rush of air.

Hound turned to his co-pilot. ‘What happened, Bluestreak? I cut all the power to take us out of laser-range...’

Bluestreak hugged the control stick, his arms shaking. ‘And I,’ he said through gritted teeth, ‘managed to reinstate it.’

‘I think everyone’s safe,’ said Mirage. ‘But we’ve lost any chance of catching up with that thing.’

‘If it’s heading where we think it’s heading,’ said Hound, ‘It won’t stay lost for long.’

Nightbeat sat cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by hundreds of machine parts laid out in widening concentric circles. He adjusted his monocular magnifying glass and frowned at the palm of his hand. He was examining the cylindrical core of an H-type Ouroborus Spycam, a solar-powered security camera designed to recharge itself so that it could, theoretically, record and re-record forever.

This particular H-type had been left untouched for centuries, recording whatever passed before it; in this case, the last few seconds of Thunderclash’s life.

Stripping the spycam had taken him six hours. He had prodded and peeled, pinched and prised until all that remained was a gold disc (they were always gold) and an encoder.

The Autobase Tannoy crackled into life. He registered the sound but was too engrossed in his work to pay any attention to the message.

*‘This is a code one priority announcement from High Command. This is Prowl speaking. I am taking this opportunity to explain exactly what has happened over the last few hours, to clear up any misunderstandings, and to quash any malicious rumours. Perhaps by doing this I can allay some of your concerns.’*

Nightbeat was only half-listening, but it was hard not to hear the discomfort in Prowl’s voice. His sentences were disjointed, broken by awkward pauses.

*‘As you are all aware, the troop inspection was cut short by an explosion. This explosion has been traced back to Doubleheader who, it has now come to light, was a Decepticon suicide bomber.’*

*‘We believe that he intended to assassinate Rodimus Prime. Thanks to the intervention of Red Alert and Thunderclash, he did not succeed.’*

Kup sat on a battered steel chair, elbows on his knees, head propped up by his fists. He stared at the team of medics surrounding Rodimus Prime’s body and tried to ignore the message being pumped through the medi-vault’s single white speaker.

*'Unfortunately, there have been casualties.'*

*'Both Rodimus and Red Alert were seriously injured. Although First Aid and his team are doing all they can, Rodimus remains in a critical condition. I have recalled Ratchet from Autobot City. He will be arriving within the next hour. I will not insult anybody by pretending that Prime's life isn't in danger...'*

Kup stood up and crossed the chamber.

*'...although I promise you that High Command will not rest until—zzzkk!'*

The speaker smouldered on the wall. Kup returned to his seat.

*'—We can do no more for him.'*

Rev-Tone lay on his circuit slab, Quark by his side. As Prowl's message drifted across the ward it made everything that had happened suddenly seem very real.

*'Meanwhile, it saddens me to report that there have been many runours concerning the fate of Thunderclash. I can confirm that no body has been recovered from Diosys, although search teams are still combing the area. High Command considers Thunderclash missing, not dead.'*

'Who are they kidding?' whispered Rev-Tone.

*'I hope this information will put an end to runours concerning Thunderclash's collusion with Doubleheader, or a supposed warp-jump back to the Galactic Core. Nightbeat is investigating the circumstances of his disappearance as I speak.'*

Prowl hunched over Rodimus Prime's desk and cradled the communicator.

'I hope this message has helped to clarify the present situation. I appreciate that this is an extremely difficult time for all of us. I urge everyone to remain calm and await further announcements instead of taking any retributive action against the Decepticons. This is a time for patience and caution, a time to pray for our injured and missing comrades.'

He bowed his head, searching for the right words, the most appropriate tone of voice. Aware that he had neither, he leant into the microphone and said, 'In the absence of Rodimus and Thunderclash, I have assumed command. My election has been approved by a High Command majority. I will, of course, step down the moment Rodimus or Thunderclash is fit to resume command.'

He tried to think of a suitable parting message, some words of comfort or a thought-provoking pay-off line (something Rodimus had a gift for). He could think of nothing; now, worried that his pause had dragged on too long, he ended his inaugural Autobot address with a mumbled 'Transmission ends.'

He shifted in Prime's chair, scanned the administrative debris on his desk, rested his head in his hands and asked himself, for the hundredth time, whether assuming command had been the right thing to do. It had seemed sensible; it had seemed reasonable; most of all, it had seemed logical. Now he wondered what he'd ever hoped to achieve.

All he'd ever wanted to do was play the trusted advisor, patient and reliable, firm but fair, a quiet strategist basking in the shadow of a charismatic commander.

By raising his hand in front of High Command, by putting himself forward as Prime's successor, he stood to lose everything.

'Done it!'

Nightbeat slapped the monitor screen in triumph. He had transferred every byte of information from the spycam's data-disc onto his computer, and now he could begin to sift through the footage. The spycam had stopped recording the moment it was removed from the arena wall, so he would have to start at the end and spool backwards.

< Rewind >

For a moment the screen was black and then he saw his own palm recede from the camera.

He watched himself drop out of shot, appear on the arena floor and run backwards.

(It was odd, watching the world in reverse.)

Autobot technicians moon walked over debris and dragged bioscanners towards their stomachs. Metal cordons were roughly removed, packed up and carried away.

< Rewind >

The first faint wisps of smoke appeared against the sky like breath on a windowpane. Tendrils of mist reached for ruptured gas lines and the tips of newborn flame. Gradually, a column of smoke attached itself to the crater. Individual Autobots, intrigued by the spectacle, strolled towards the rim, backs against the flame, and lowered themselves into the pit.

< Rewind >

A crowd soon formed, beckoned by Sideswipe's security team. Medics began carrying the injured and dying into the crater, where they were lovingly arranged in a heap, arms and legs twisted just so. First Aid, in ambulance mode, reversed into shot and deposited Rodimus Prime and Red Alert onto stretchers. Eager medics carried the smoking bodies into the crater. The crowd re-knitted itself as First Aid drove away.

There was a brief flash; a small group of Autobots flung themselves through the air and pressed a bulbous fireball back into a gas pipe. Mission accomplished, they loitered around the tear as if nothing had happened.

< Rewind >

Charred Autobots backtracked over wet ground and sucked foam into extinguishers, fresh fires crackling in their wake, filling their footprints.

Other robots joined the scene, beleaguered and disoriented. Some even walked forwards. When there was room for no more, the crowd slowly dropped to its knees and lay face down, interlocking limbs in time for the first few gusts of ash and flame-flecked wind to pass over them. The crater, meanwhile, had become hidden behind a column of smoke and flame.

The crowd were suddenly hoisted off their feet and sucked towards the crater.

The screen faded to white, and then the whiteness was pulled into Doubleheader's open chest. The Pretender was shaking Rodimus Prime's hand while Thunderclash and Red Alert backed away.

< Pause >

Nightbeat blinked and stared at the screen. This was it.

< Play // Slow >

This time the footage ran in the right direction (cause before effect, one before another) but at a slower speed. Prime slapped an open hand into Doubleheader's oyster palm. The fake Autobrand popped open (all spring and flip and load-lock) and revealed a delicate proton bomb, crystalline and glaciated, wedged like organs around a ribcage.

Thunderclash and Red Alert left their starting blocks, lunging for the bomber-to-be.

Doubleheader smiled (sad and proud).

Rodimus pulled the traitor's arm from its socket.

< Slow // Slow >

The explosion still registered as a single white flash, but for one quivering frame it was possible to see Doubleheader come apart at the seams, his fragments clustered jealously around the blast-core like a ring of asteroids.

The whiteness subsided for a second (a second of slow-time, that is, therefore a second of a second of a second) and then another burst of bleach-out and zero-viz signalled the beginning of a chain-reaction. Smoke rose to the occasion, blacking the screen, and when it cleared the crowd was in place, clawing the floor with their blistered fingers.

< Stop >

It was enough. Nightbeat relaxed in his chair, surprised at the tension in his shoulders. He rewound the footage, paused between explosions one and two, sat back and stared.

There he was: unconscious and smeared with gore, facedown on the crater floor: Thunderclash.

His was a world transformed, a world where everything that mattered was compressed into this cold, circular room, a world where events were slow to unfold, where the passage of time (so lethargic, so uncaring) was marked by the heartbeat of a life support machine.

Kup balanced on the edge of his seat, raw and sore and tenderised. Rodimus Prime lay on an operating table a few metres away, creased like laundered linen. The surgeons had done their best to erase his injuries, to remove all traces of damage.

At least Prime was intact, he kept telling himself. They'd driven electrical cables into his cranium, wired his chest to a block of machinery, peeled away layers of rusted alloy, discarded body parts, fed energy-bolts into his brain and cauterised pumping tides of oil.

The detail was in the glimmer of the skin, in the patched-up, touched-up, strung-up tendoflex and sinew. Close-up, his body was all gloss and grandeur: the hi-shine inference of health, threatening in its persistence. His was the perfect shell.

Kup had watched it all. He'd held the door open for the stretcher and, hours later, watched the last medic close it behind him. And all the while he had been trapped in his own personal limbo, his optics focused on Prime's chemo'd skull, waiting for the flicker, the stir.

He remembered the scene he had made when the surgeons had turned to leave. He'd leapt to his feet, blocked the door, grabbed Rescue by the shoulders and screamed:

'You're leaving him? You're giving up on him? That's it?'

'There's nothing else we can do, Kup. I'm sorry.'

'Sorry? You're letting him die on that table and you're sorry? Get your team back in here. There must be something you can do! There must be something...'

First Aid had walked in, wiping his hands. 'What's going on? Kup, look... My team has done all they can. Rodimus is physically intact, but the rest is up to him.'

Kup had forced himself to relax. 'What's wrong with him, doc?'

'To be honest, I'm not entirely sure. We've re-routed his CPU and minimised energy loss. For the last two hours the support generator has been feeding him energy, but it's had little effect. I think his brain module has been damaged. The lobe scans reveal some sort of microsymbiotic cerebro-aneurysm. His brain is simply shutting down, stage by stage.'

'What are his chances?'

'I've never known anyone to recover from an MCA.'

'Ratchet will save him.'

'I'll be honest with you, Kup. The only thing keeping Prime alive right now is the Matrix inside his chest, and we all know what's inside that.'

'Possessed or not, how long can the Matrix support him?'

'This line on the monitor screen here is Prime's bio-pulse. It's been growing weaker since we slabbed him. If it continues to deteriorate, he'll be dead within six days.'

'No. He's not going to die. Ratchet will know what to do.'

'We're keeping the medi-vault under constant surveillance, and I'll be checking his progress every hour, but you're welcome to stay here if you want and keep him company.'

'I'm not leaving this room 'til he's back on his feet.'

And that had been that. Kup had folded his arms and stared at the floor and heard the door clamp shut.

*This isn't right, he thought. I'm the old timer. It's my turn to die, not yours. You're still young: underneath that revamped bodywork you're still the hothead I saved all those years ago.*

He replayed his conversation with First Aid and tried to pick out anything that might give him hope. His thoughts kept turning to Ratchet. 'Come on doc,' he said, placing his hand on Prime's forehead. 'Can't you go any faster?'

Mainframe waved to Blaster and Ultra Magnus. 'I've got it. On screen... now.'

The Communications Hall fell silent. Every Autobot stopped to face the main screen, where the Enslaver was moving slowly over the nearby mountain range.

Ultra Magnus moved to the front row and held a communicator to his lips. 'You have entered Autobot airspace without declaring your intention. Please identify yourselves before advancing any further.' He held the mouthpiece within kissing distance, waiting for a response.

The Enslaver just trundled on, a slave to its own propulsion, its own gravitational pull. Magnus studied the lineaments and crenulations, the embrasures scored in cambic shadow. It was huge: it was a genetic anomaly of a ship, a double take of a ship, a four-letter word of a ship.

'We're moving to red alert, Blaster. Tell Wheeljack to fortify the City.'



The hall went black, as if it had ducked into a tunnel, and when the lights returned they were russet-red, candy-coated.

Magnus faced the crowd. 'Everyone to your posts. Prepare for enemy engagement. This is not a drill. All entrances and docking bays will be sealed in minus five and counting.'

On the bridge of Enslaver General Rodern leant over a comms port and said, 'Commander Magnus, I apologise if we have violated your airspace. My name is Rodern. I have escorted my people here in search of sanctuary after the Decepticons razed our homeworld. Please, commander, we mean no harm. If we are not welcome, we will leave immediately.'

*'If we have misjudged your intentions, Rodern, we apologise. Perhaps we could arrange a meeting to discuss the sanctuary you speak of. If you are willing, we can begin talks immediately. What do you say?'*

Rodern let the question hang.

'Stop the ship,' he said finally. 'And release the first wave of Tridents.'

And so, at 5:32pm on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2012, the first blow was struck.

A wire-guided tri-stem proton missile was fired from a Trident's front-mounted cupola and travelled 11.7 miles (north-westerly wind, Force 6) to connect with the loading precinct on the southern elevation of Autobot City: Earth.

Magnus felt the City tremble: a shudder at what was to come. He saw the ships shredding the sky, green on blue, and knew that everything had changed. He was used to it (the *volte face*, the turnaround, the sudden lurch from one thing to another, words like 'expected', 'intended', 'foreseen' and 'wanted' suddenly burdened with a stunted two-letter prefix), but this... this just wasn't *necessary*. Not now, not with Rodimus and closure and...

'Blaster!' he yelled. 'Radio Prowl on Cybertron. I want reinforcements on standby. Wheeljack, I want you to rendezvous with Grimlock and Springer and meet me in the command tower. Jetfire! Take the air corps and intercept.'

He knew the attackers. He knew the moment he saw the Tridents. Four years ago he had responded to Soundwave's distress signal and fought them in the Badlands. Four years ago he had read and re-read Perceptor's reports of an attack on Autobot City that had culminated in Autobots being crucified on the command tower. Four years ago he had watched vid-cam footage of Rodimus Prime throwing one of their leaders to his death.

He knew the attackers. He knew their tactics, their tics and trademarks: after the staggered air strike (dive in, pull back, dive-bomb, recoil) they would deposit the ground troops – cannon fodder used to soak up ammo and wear the enemy down.

'I can't contact Cybertron,' said Blaster. 'The Quintessons have hit us with some sort of scrambler. We're on our own.'

By 5:42pm the perimeter walls were disfigured, their armoured skin bunched in flaps and folds, all split lips and puffed eyes. Tridents skimmed the damage. Stray laser bolts mashed the landscape, flicking rock into a moat that was already starting to overheat.

At 5:44pm, after twelve minutes of clearance codes and elbow grease, Autobot City began its transformation from metropolis to battle station. Dummy towers split to reveal rocket launchers, blast shields and helipads, and ninety-four entrance points were fused closed. Aerials retracted, windows disappeared, and access ramps were dragged back inside. Detonated bridges hung in the air, paralysed by shock, and then collapsed into the moat. Rail guns steamed into position while transport tracks thrust anti-aircraft weaponry into the sunlight.

Thirty miles away, General Rodern sank further into his chair and reached for the remote. The stack of monitors in front of him resembled a fly's eye, each glassy retina reflecting images of battle. A hundred Tridents were saddled with a spycam to ensure full-spectrum, round-the-clock coverage. He'd witnessed the first few glorious explosions and the City's conversion into a fortress, and was now looking forward to the post-watershed pictures.

He wondered whether Quantax had reached Cybertron yet. The Transformers' homeworld (ha!) was further away from Aquaria than this mud-ball, so perhaps his comrade had yet to arrive. Perhaps, if he crushed these Cybes quick enough, he could gatecrash the bigger battle. A nearby explosion brought him back to the situation at hand.

'We've been hit,' said Q-537 from the communications pit. 'Two small-scale photon blasts near subsection 300371. I'm requesting a damage report.'

'I don't care about specifics. Deploy all hull weaponry. Hit everything you can. Twice.'

'Are you sure that was a good idea, Hound?'

Bluestreak steadied the windswept Autoshuttle and glanced at his teammate. They'd spent the last half-hour playing catch-up and now, within metres of the Enslaver, Hound had started firing the KK guns.

'Keep her steady,' was Hound's only comment. 'This is our last chance for close-quarters combat.'

'No, that's close enough,' decided Mirage. 'Get us clear. You know what happened last time we got within sniffing distance.'

Hound pulled away as the Enslaver opened fire on the mountainside. Doused in dust but miraculously unscathed, the Autoshuttle barrelled towards the City.

'We're too late,' said Hound, taking the shuttle in low. 'They're here.'

'Get us inside,' snapped Mirage.

'Metroplex is in fortress mode. He's impregnable.'

'Surely there's a hidden entrance or—'

'He's *impregnable*, Mirage!'

An explosion knocked them off course. A portion of the ceiling disintegrated and flames crawled the walls like poison ivy. A pack of Tridents moved in for another attack.

Ratchet climbed out of his seat. 'I hate to state the obvious, but we've got to disembark!'

The shuttle dipped and dithered, trailing smoke and shedding parts. Bluestreak locked the controls and ran to the others at the back, near the rear. The ground below was full of crater-crescents and the first few Quintesson casualties.

'You know what to do, everyone,' said Mirage.

The moat flashed by first, then the punched-up walls, then the barricades and barracks – and suddenly they were flying over the heart of the City. Bluestreak was the first to jump and the first to land. He looked up in time to see the others hit the ground like cluster bombs. The shuttle slid into the distance, engulfed in flame.

Prowl sat at Rodimus Prime's desk and felt the energy drain from his body. He had been trying to organise some paperwork (a generic term for data discs and com-slugs and procene acetates) in an effort to discover the various missions and strategies that had not yet been presented to High Command.

Yesterday he'd have relished the opportunity to revamp Prime's admin system; now he realised that there was more to it than shuffling papers: there were proposals to consider, troop transferrals to oversee, meetings to arrange. He'd once thought that leadership – at least the Rodimus Prime school of leadership – had been all about unforced charisma, an inspiring turn-of-phrase. You know, general soft-focus hero worship stuff. He'd never realised that there was so much red tape – and he usually loved red tape.

He selected a random report from a freshly-built stack and –

This didn't even *feel* right.

What was he doing here, rummaging through private journals when the diarist was only a few miles away? The more he thought about it, the more uneasy he was about how readily he had stepped into Prime's boots. But who else could handle the job? He ran through the list, ticking boxes in his head. Magnus had always rejected outright leadership; Perceptor lacked the interpersonal skills; Jazz had recently been demoted; Mirage was unpopular; Siren was still learning his trade; Springer ... well, there was something about Springer that made him unsuitable (it was the closest Prowl came to a gut instinct). The Triple Changer not only wanted to be leader, he felt that he was *destined* to rule, that it was Meant to Be (perhaps that's why he'd recently started dabbling in re-fits and circuit-steroids – as if leadership was reliant on muscle and tone).

That just left Grimlock.

Grimlock. Of course. Deep down, he knew that he'd become leader to stop Grimlock from doing so, to stop 1987 happening all over again, to stop 1991 happening all over again.

This time round he wasn't recovering from a splinter grenade or fighting a systems relapse; this time he wasn't bound to a held hand or a slurred word. It was a simple choice: take command or watch Grimlock and his No Code cronies run the Resistance into the ground.

The desktop communicator buzzed into life.

*'Prowl, it's Pointblank. You said we should meet up to discuss the future of the squad. I'm quite happy to take control but I think Getaway might be interested.'*

'I haven't really had a chance to think it over. Can I get back to you?'

*'It is rather urgent...'*

'Look, I'll buzz you within the hour, okay? Prowl out.'

He stood to leave and gathered a batch of files. Another voice filtered into the room:

*'Vroom here. I know you're busy, but could you tell me whether the surveillance mission is still on?'*

'What surveillance mission?'

*'Powerflash, Jackpot and I were planning a night-drop in the Kyth Valley. Rodimus wanted us to look for the Decepticons' new recon stations.'*

'I'm going to have to talk to you about it later, okay?'

*'Right. So is it off or on?'*

'It's postponed. I need to discuss it with you properly before I give authorisation, especially if Emyrissis is going to be within range.'

*'Yeah, but Rodimus had already agreed to—'*

'Prowl out.'

Prowl hurried for the door; at this rate he would be late for the meeting, and he hated being late. He reached for the door-pad.

*'Prowl?'*

'What is it?!' Prowl stared at the desk-comm, daring it to make another sound. There was a lengthy silence before:

*'It's Kup. Sorry if I'm disturbing you.'*

'Kup, look, I didn't mean—'

*'I'm just interrupting to report that Prime has taken a turn for the worse. You did ask to be kept informed of our leader's condition.'*

'Yes, yes I did. How bad is it?' He cursed himself for the clumsiness of his words, which hit the floor like dead weights.

*'What, out of ten?'*

Kup's bitterness was so intimate, so casual, that he might as well have been standing in the room.

*'First Aid says this could be it.'*

Prowl didn't know what to say. He wasn't used to dealing with situations like this, not with someone like Kup, someone he regarded as an independent, competent - not to mention pig-headed - officer. 'Just keep me informed,' he said in the end.

En route to the meeting chamber he began to consider, for the first time, the very real possibility that Rodimus was never coming back.

*'The spectre flits from eye to eye*

*Bound and bent by iris sheen*

*A symmetry of what will be*

*And what has never been*

*Time relived is time regained*

*And soon the—'*

'Sevax! Sevax. Listen. If you don't stop reciting your turgid poetry I will flush you into hyperspace.'

'I shudder at your threat, mighty Jolup!' said Sevax, and turned to the window. 'In my day you'd have been thrown into the Sharkpit for interrupting a quotation from the Old Texts. Of course they weren't called the Old Texts back then. They were just, well, the Texts.'

Jolup stared at him in disbelief. 'I tell you, Ryknia, I think the body-swap has curdled his brain.'

Ryknia smiled and continued inspecting his new body. Decepticon without, Quintesson within, he was toying with a new category: Quintecon. Like Jolup and Sevax, he was so streamlined, so polished, that he wondered how his boots found purchase on the floor. He was practically frictionless, all wipe-clean surfaces and planed angles. The only thing he disliked was the Decepticon insignia, a day-old bruise on perfect flesh. Still, at least the others shared a similar scar.

After four years in a warm protein solution, blind to the outside world, Ryknia found his new mobility rather overwhelming. Coming on-line, he had almost suffered sensory overload. Touching, seeing, walking, transforming – things he had taken for granted had, because of his incapacity, become the greatest gifts of all. Now he saw the world through an alien eye, through Cybertronian micro-ocular filters and image-saturates. It was the same as before – grubby, hard-edged and covered in fingerprints – but at least he could interact with it.

He massaged his temples surreptitiously, hoping to erase a band of pain before the others noticed his discomfort.

'You're getting it too?' asked Jolup. 'Like your brain is on fire?'

'It's not just me then,' said Ryknia, and drew a lobotomy line across his forehead. 'You think Ferrax fudged a few neural connections?'

'Nah. We wouldn't be functioning unless our brains were wired in properly. It's probably teething problems. You can't expect to be stitched into someone else's body without a few aches and pains.'

Tired of the view of hyperspace, Sevax turned away from the window, stretched, and began pacing the officers' quarters. He found it difficult to sit still for more than a minute; he was always flexing and inflating, tensing and teasing. 'Who do you think these guys were before we took over their bodies?' he asked, clicking his spinal strut into place and starting to shadow box.

'How the hell should I know?' said Jolup. 'Who cares?'

'The Cybertronians are divided into factions, aren't they?' said Ryknia. 'These bodies belonged to Decepticons. The three of us were probably a team judging from, well, you know...' He gestured at their similar designs.

'All Cybes look the same to me,' snorted Jolup, who didn't relish the prospect of hanging around with a poet and a pragmatist purely because they had inherited complementary body-shells. The arrangement was fine for the time being – it meant they could share transplant-related problems – but once they had colonised Cybertron, he'd be happy to go it alone.

'Xenon thinks that the Decepticons started to come round during the transplant,' said Sevax, with a sugary glee. 'They could feel their brains being peeled away...'

Jolup laughed. 'Feeling each and every neural connector stretch and snap – oh man. It makes my servomotors freeze up just thinking about it.'

'The techs did a good patch-up job, though,' conceded Ryknia, studying his reflection in his forearm (where were the bulging eyes, the rounded cheeks, the fanged rectangle of a mouth? He was so much uglier than before). 'We can do a lot of damage in these shells. We should regard Cybertron as our official testing ground.'

'Definitely,' nodded Jolup. 'I can't wait for a second crack at the Cybertronians. We were so close last time... You should have seen them in the Badlands, Ryknia. Decepticons scattering in all directions, getting their legs blown out from under them. Sharkticons coming out of the ground. Beautiful.'

'Reminds me of another passage from the Old Texts,' said Sevax, puffing out his chest.

*'And stunted children of ironed gold*

*In fields of raw and ruddy hue*

*Rose up to catch Centau—'*

'Oh, shut up,' said Ryknia. 'No one believes in the Texts anymore, old or otherwise. Save the stanzas until the Cargo arrives.'

'But I'm bored! We've been in hyperspace for hours! Rodern's probably wiped out half of Earth by now!'

'Rodern has the easy job,' said Jolup. 'The Cybertronians on Earth are just a splinter group, a distraction. Even Ghyrik came close to defeating them until they released the titan, the one who lives inside their city. They say he can swat fleets of Tridents with a single gesture.'

'Rodern's taken precautions this time round,' said Ryknia. 'He expects to face the titan.'

Sevax shrugged and returned to the view. 'Book 2, Chapter 1:  
*And with the ancient prize buried deep  
Beneath Quintyxia's mottled crust  
The Exodus drew near...*'

Half blind with optical feedback and retina-burn, Emyrissus watched his skeletal hand flake into the ground. He felt no pain, and wondered when his nerve circuits had decided to give up the ghost, when they'd said, 'No, enough's enough', and quietly burned themselves out.

He was smeared across a bombed-out and blistered Iaconian high street (and the topographical adjectives could just as easily have been applied to his body). He wasn't sure when his leg had fallen off, but there it was, lying at the other end of the street like a half-smoked cigarette.

Although he'd been hit, high above the IbeX spaceport, he'd managed to ride the thermals into Iaconian airspace and give Slugslinger and Misfire a convincing crash-landing. He'd hidden among the crater-flames, leaving the Decepticons, with their bristling arrogance, to assume that they'd finished him off. After a painful front-crawl across precincts and suburbs, he was now only half a mile from the Archives Centre. For an intact Autobot, home was but a short canter or quad-thrust away. Blurr could've made the journey in 0.09 seconds, Superior in a couple of strides, Pulsar or Sleepscape by teleporting a few moments into the future. For Emyrissus, bent on his hands and knee, dragging a cocktail of glistening lubricants, every inch of ground was as vast as the Badlands, as the Acid Wastes, as the Rad Zone itself.

He thought of what he'd seen at Darkmount, and his jaw dropped – literally. It hit the ground teeth-first.

At the end of the street he saw the entrance to Autobase. The weathered metal skin spoke of age, weight and frailty: the public face of the Resistance, complete with crow's feet and a furrowed brow. In reality, it was just a holographic façade, coated with its own holographic dust, dappled with its own holographic moonlight.

He dug his better hand into the ground and began to drag himself towards sanctuary. Although the end of his journey was in sight, he knew he was going to die. Oh yes, no doubt about that. He was reminded by the sounds and the shivers in his brain, by the oil arcing over his forehead. It didn't matter whether he died on a slab in Ratchet's medical lab, or in a tatty stairwell en route to AMC1, just as long as he told someone what had happened to Galvatron.

The noise came from nowhere – a nonsense string of sound-snippets, like cassette tape tripping on the spool.

He realised it was coming from his own mouth.

Autobase winked at him conspiratorially (only forty metres away – come *on*). All he needed to do was break the holo-seal and trigger the alarm. His vibrating hand shook off loose casing until it was pared to a shoestring. There was a shift in balance as his waist rejected his body.

With only six metres to go, his arm froze up. He rested his head on the ground as his body began to kill itself off bit-by-bit, tying up loose ends and unfinished business, setting its affairs in order before shutdown.

Bumblebee crouched behind a shattered windowpane and fumbled around his feet for another energon clip. He'd taken the vacuum lift to the command tower hoping that sub-space communicator inside could be used to contact Cybertron. He'd been unsuccessful, but the tower had proven a good place from which to shoot down Tridents. A damaged Trident was actually heading towards him now, in fact, smoke spewing from its rear.

He found a clip in a pool of shadow, jacked it into his rifle, shouldered another splinter of glass from the window frame and fired, trying to knock the attach craft off course.

It didn't work.

The Trident plunged into the command tower and speared Bumblebee on its tip. It shuddered as its engines collapsed and an airlock flew off its hinges. The pilot jumped to the floor, brushed down his cloak and only then noticed the unconscious figure impaled on the ship's spike.

'Have we met before?' asked Death's Head. 'No? Maybe you've just got one of those faces, yes?'

Deep inside Autobot City, Mindwipe was sitting at his computer screen and fighting the urge to leap into a vacuum lift and get the hell out of there. Why did he have to be stocktaking the day the city suffered its first attack in over a year? Twenty-seven levels up, above millions of tonnes of hardware and granite, his newfound comrades were fighting for their lives; he, meanwhile, was stuck in a reinforced bunker with two other ex-'Cons and a dwindling supply of weaponry.

He watched Skullcruncher load laser-clips onto the trans-materialiser. Triggerhappy pulled handfuls of laser pistols off the shelves. The city held a modest complement of weaponry at the best of times, but the last twelve months had seen regular shipments to Delphi and Autobase. The vault now resembled a giant, stainless steel sink.

Every so often, Magnus or Grimlock would request some long-range torpedoes or blister-bombs. Skullcruncher would beam them topside and follow their fate via the monitor screens.

Magnus's voice was filling the room now: *'We need portable rocket packs, as many as you've got. I'll post more receivers to—'* His voice was drowned out by distortion as a Trident flew too close. *'—Magnus out.'*

Mindwipe ran into the vault. 'You heard him, guys! I want everyone hauling anti-gravity packs!'

The vault vibrated as another explosion did some damage above ground.

'That's the biggest one yet!' said Triggerhappy. 'I tell you, we're not safe!'

'We're a hell of a lot safer than we would be up there,' said Skullcruncher.

'That's not what I mean. I don't think the *city* is safe. There are 31 levels to this base, 25 of which are below ground. The Autobots had to reinforce natural caverns to accommodate the city's foundations.'

Mindwipe heaved another backpack onto the transmat. 'So what, you think they've weakened the countryside? Upset the ecosystem or something? Fine time to go green, Triggerhappy.'

'I'm saying that the renovations may have undermined the entire city. We're lucky it hasn't collapsed.'

'Which is what you think is going to happen?'

'If the Quintessons keep on pummelling us, then yes!'

Grimlock waded into waist-high Trident wreckage, found the pinioned pilot (warm and unconscious) and pumped a full clip into his chest. Through a backwash of green flame, he saw Ultra Magnus and a group of huddling Autobots.

'What's going on?' he demanded.

'We need more men in the air,' replied Ultra Magnus. 'There are just too many Tridents.' Magnus turned to Freeway, Streetwise and Skids, who were already strapping themselves in their backpacks. 'Listen. You're up there to complement Jetfire's team, not get yourselves killed. And that goes double for you, Freeway. No risks.' He watched them take off. 'I hope that turns the tide, Grimlock. We can't hold out forever.'

'You think Blaster reached Cybertron? The Comms room was—'

Grimlock's voice skipped a beat as his chest exploded. He looked more surprised than pained as he fell clumsily on his back.

Magnus skidded to the Dinobot's side and slipped a hand underneath his neck. Oil collected in his palm.

'Robot down!' he cried, noticing the dotted line of craters leading to Grimlock's feet. Why hadn't he been paying attention? Why hadn't he reacted quickly enough? He felt a subtle shift in Grimlock's body weight, watched the Dinobot's optics drain of light and removed his hand, now black.

'Bastards!' he yelled, firing at the sky.

'Calm down, yes?'

Magnus spun on his heels. 'You!'

'Relax,' said Death's Head, holding up his hands. 'I'm not with the Quintessons. If I was you'd be dead by now, eh?'

'What are you doing here?'

'Hitched a lift on one of their ships.'

'They said you died on Junk.'

'Evidently not. I have a proposition for you, yes?'

'You're here to make a deal?!'

'Drop the gun and we'll negotiate.'

Ultra Magnus looked at him, weighing up the coincidences and the betrayals. 'I haven't got time for this,' he sighed, and walked away.

'Don't turn your back on me, Magnus! I can give you valuable information! I can help you win this battle!'

Ultra Magnus froze. 'Well?'

'Make me an offer, yes?'

Quark tiptoed down blinding white corridors, a Fullstasis games-board under his arm. The med-centre felt like an enamel maze, all minty molars and winking wisdoms. He paused at the main terminus and peered down the only darkened passageway; it looked out of place, as if a root canal had withered and died. This was where the new intensive care ward would have been, had work not ground to a halt after the assassination attempt. Discarded hand-drills and portable path-blasters leant against metal walls still smudged with shadow. Fences made from spare recharge slabs gave the tunnel an alluring, out-of-bounds ambience.

First Aid had asked for the drilling to be postponed until Rodimus was 'out of the woods', a human expression that Quark, who had only ever read about Earth (oh, and seen a bootleg of Huffer's homemade vid-reel, *Mudball*), did not understand. Rev-Tone had joined the more morbid patients in nicknaming the extension 'Rodimus Ward', pre-empting what many saw as the inevitable.

Quark walked on, trying not to think of his leader's condition in case, in some small, unexplainable way, it made things worse. Up ahead, however, was the maximum-security medi-vault, a spherical, super-dense containment unit built into AMC1: an air bubble in concrete. Rodimus was inside. He sidled up to the vault 'door' – more of a vaguely circular outline etched into the ten-metre thick titanium wall.

The two guards, Boss and Sprocket, ignored him as he confronted the rectangle of nuke-strength plexi, just above eye level, and peered inside. Prime looked hyper-real: too bright, too sharply defined. Kup perched on a chair by his side, a casebook study of rage and tension.

He backed away, ashamed at his voyeurism, and felt something sharp tap his thigh. Throwback smiled up at him from a stretcher. 'Hey, Quark. You wouldn't kick a robot when he's down, would you?'

Quark shrugged apologetically as Search and Rescue carried the patient into the nearby ward. 'Are you alright?' he called, catching up.

'The tests make me weak. I need time to recuperate before the next lot.'

'Why do you need so many? You seemed okay before...'

'Perceptor's looking into the side effects of pan-dimensional travel. Apparently there are a lot of things even he can't figure out.'

Throwback was loaded onto his circuit slab and seemed to fall off-line instantly.

'Perceptor's going to kill him one of these days,' said Rev-Tone from the other side of the ward.

Quark set the Fullstasis board on Rev-Tone's slab-side table. 'I'm sure Perceptor knows what he's doing.'

Rev-Tone's condition had improved. For one thing, there were markedly less energon feeds burrowing under his skin. As Quark slid into the visitor's seat he nudged an empty Hypergrade vial that had been stashed from sight.

'I just saw Rodimus Prime,' Quark whispered. 'He looks awful – just lying there as if he's been dead for days. And Kup's sitting beside him like he's wondering when it's polite to leave or something, and—'

'Calm down, Quark. You're twitching again.' Rev-Tone waited until Quark had clicked his head back into place. 'Any news from above?'

'Everything's ground to a halt. The squad's been inactive since the troop inspection; all orders have been frozen until further notice. It's the same with every team. Nothing's moving anymore.'

'Hasn't anyone spoken to Prowl?'

'Yes. Hoist, Vroom, Sideswipe, Scattershot. All of the squad leaders, in fact. He keeps telling them to wait. Still, it can't be easy being commander.'

‘Yeah, right. I hear he moved into Prime’s office before they’d closed the medi-vault door.’ Rev-Tone looked away and coiled a loose wire around his finger. ‘Primus, I can’t wait to get out of here! This place is so dull!’

‘Why not leave? You’re almost back to your normal self.’

‘First Aid says my ambulatory systems aren’t fully repaired. I’m losing energon almost as quickly as they pump it into me. Don’t look so worried! My core processors just need time to recharge. In the meantime I’m operating at 40% efficiency and getting on people’s nerves.’

‘Like I said, you’re almost back to... your normal... self.’

Rev-Tone followed Quark’s gaze across the ward and saw Red Alert standing in the doorway with First Aid. The Security Officer’s head hung low, as if the floor tiles entranced him. Most of his bodywork was still in tatters, emergency surgery having concentrated on rebuilding his internal components. His left boot was encased in crude orthopaedic scaffold that corrected his balance as he shuffled down the aisle. First Aid offered a shoulder to lean on.

Rev-Tone, Quark and the other patients looked on, not knowing how to react.

And then someone clapped.

Someone clapped, and other people joined in.

Rev-Tone clapped, then Quark, then Ammo, Warpath, Hurricane, Hotrider, Moonfire, Samsara and the rest. By the time Red Alert had reached his slab in the corner, the ward was filled with applause.

Let the record state that it was Bluestreak who first saw them.

Twelve of them; a nice tidy dozen. They looked harmless enough once the sinking sun attacked them from a different angle: crude blocks of windowless metal, sticky with Formica sheen, propelled by dry-wired hop-thrust engines and rockets like dirty plug holes.

Having guessed, correctly, that they were troop carriers, Bluestreak opened his wrist communicator and said, ‘Magnus, the Quintessons are going for a body-drop on the western perimeter. Can you spare anyone?’

In seconds, Silverbolt, Broadside and Springer were flying over his head. Tridents moved in to protect their own, and the troop carriers were caught in pensive crossfire. Some managed to pass directly over the bastions.

Jetfire snagged the frontrunners with a ragged burst of hi-ex and left them to crash face-first in the street. Sharkticons poured out of their split sides. The other troop-cubes landed in different precincts, oblivious to the groundswell of laser that bounced off their titanium bellies. Doors exploded off their hinges and the riot began.

Nightbeat’s hand hovered over the door-pad and he ran through his speech one last time.

In his head, he added dramatic pauses and knowing looks, and generally came across as an informed and dryly intelligent lecturer. He knew the reality would be somewhat different. He pressed the pad and stepped inside the command chamber.

The room was muggy and bloodshot, bathed in a grainy red dye. He felt as if he was trapped inside a black eye or a simmering wound, all puffy folds and burst blood vessels. High Command – or what was left of it (just Prowl, Perceptor and – talk about scraping the bottom of the barrel – Sideswipe) – sat at the famous roundtable. There were seven empty chairs.

The room smelt stale, as if it predated everyone in it.

‘Nightbeat,’ said Prowl, nodding a greeting. ‘If you’d like to take us through what you’ve found.’

Nightbeat fed a disc into the wall and waited alongside the monitor.

‘I’m sorry to have called you here on such short notice, but what I’ve found simply cannot wait. You asked me to investigate the Diosys incident with a view to finding out what happened to Thunderclash. I think I have the answer.’ Nightbeat unclipped a laser-pointer from his waist. ‘Basically, I found a hidden security camera and slowed down the footage to piece together events before and after Prime’s handshake.’ He ringed centre-screen. ‘Here, you can see Doubleheader.’

He watched High Command as he spoke. Prowl was stern with concentration; Perceptor was relaxed and attentive; Sideswipe was rolling a bullet between his fingers.



'If you look closely, you'll see Doubleheader's chest plate splitting open. There's the bomb. Thunderclash and Red Alert have just noticed what's happening.'

He skipped through the footage, jumping from one image to another. The screen went white and he froze the film. 'This is the first explosion, the one that did Prime the most damage. It actually triggered a chain reaction.' He skipped a few more frames, until Prime's remains were tent-pegged to the crater slope. Thunderclash was curled up but still intact. 'Remember that this all happened in a few seconds. In real life, what follows registered as nothing more than a series of flashes.'

He prodded the picture forward and a new ball of light appeared near the base of the crater. It faded to reveal a new figure, obscured by smoke, who lurched forward and slammed something into Thunderclash's back. Another flash, and when that had faded so had Thunderclash and the visitor.

Nightbeat froze the film and turned to his audience. 'And that is what happened,' he said proudly.

'Nice work,' said Prowl.

Sideswipe looked around, exasperated. 'Did we all just see the same thing? Because what I got from that exercise was some blurred guy slapping Thunderclash on the back.'

'Rewind the footage to that moment, Nightbeat' said Prowl. 'And give us your theories.'

'Well, it seems that Thunderclash was abducted. This figure here - his abductor - must have used a personal teleporter to get in and out.'

'Yes,' said Prowl. 'But who is he? The smoke covers his face.'

'He's obviously a Decepticon,' said Sideswipe matter-of-factly.

'Maybe not,' said Nightbeat. 'Why would the Decepticons send an abductor when their deep-plant plans to blow his cover? And why Thunderclash? Why take him? Why not kill him?'

'Your point is noted,' said Prowl. 'But if not the Decepticons, then who?'

They turned as one as the door burst open and Chromedome stumbled inside. He was cradling a block of machinery - machinery that had shoulders, a torso, a frail head and a name: Emyrissus.

'I found him near holo-hatch four,' said Chromedome, carrying the Micromaster's remains to the roundtable.

'Is he dead?' Prowl's every instinct screamed 'yes', but he had to ask.

'I managed to revive him, but he wouldn't let me take him to AMC1. He insisted on being brought here.' Chromedome looked down at the robot in his arms. 'He said there was something that you needed to know.'

Emyrissus let out a weak electronic squeal and jerked his head. Prowl was already on his feet. 'What did you want to tell me, Emyrissus?'

'Saw sum - saw sum - saw something... a kw... a kw...' The syllables fell from his lips with the force of a dying breath.

'You saw something at Darkmount?'

'Glvtrn.'

'What did Galvatron do?'

'Nuh. Nuh.' Emyrissus' voice fought hard to escape his lips. 'Tuk hm. They tuk hm.'

'Where's the patient?!'

Search and Rescue crashed into the chamber loaded with energon pads and resuscitators. Prowl stalled them with an outstretched arm. 'Don't move! We need him conscious!'

The command clearly worried Chromedome, who was about to hand the Micromaster over. Prowl gripped his arm.

'Who took Galvatron, Emyrissus? Who took him?'

Chromedome looked over his shoulder. The medics were ready to pounce. 'Prowl, perhaps we should—'

'Who took him?'

'Kwi... kwi...'

'Please commander, let us through.'

'Stay back!'

'Emyrissus!' Nightbeat pointed to the blurred figure on screen. 'Was it this person? Did this person take Galvatron?'

'Y - y - y - y - y - y - y...'

Prowl bent in close. 'Who are these people, Emyrissus?'

‘Kwi – kwi – Quintessonzzzzzzzzzz...’

The Micromaster’s optics faded and his voice whirl-pooled into silence. Search and Rescue stretched him down the corridor without another word, leaving Chromedome to stare at his chest, which resembled a butcher’s apron.

Prowl was already pacing around the table. ‘The Quintessons have abducted the leader of the Decepticons?’

‘And, it seems, his perceived counterpart,’ said Perceptor, gesturing to the screen. ‘It would appear that they have taken Thunderclash too.’

‘Chromedome,’ said Prowl. ‘I want you to let Siren know what’s happened. Patch through to Autobot City, too. ‘Tell them to be on their guard.’

‘Mirage and Ratchet still haven’t arrived,’ said Sideswipe. ‘You think there’s a connection, Prowl?’

‘I don’t know.’

Chromedome left the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

Nightbeat took a chance and slipped into Kup’s chair, sensing the impending discussion.

Prowl was the last to sit down. ‘I would welcome any comments,’ he said quietly.

‘I thought all the Quintessons were dead.’

‘We just drove them off planet, Sideswipe. There was always the possibility of another invasion.’

‘It’d hardly call this an invasion. They’re just picking us off one by one.’

‘To teleport in and out like that, they’d have to be close by,’ said Perceptor.

If he had been able, Prowl would have turned a shade paler. ‘We don’t have the troops or the hardware to repel another Quintesson assault,’ he said, looking across the table. ‘You’re keeping quiet, Nightbeat. What are you thinking?’

‘I’m thinking that we should tell the Decepticons. Warn them. They probably think that we’re behind Galvatron’s disappearance.’ He looked at three stony faces. ‘Hey, two minutes ago we were all ready to blame *them* for Thunderclash’s death.’

‘It might be wise to do as he says,’ said Perceptor.

‘No,’ said Prowl. ‘They wouldn’t believe us. If they’d buzzed us two minutes ago denying their involvement would we have believed them? Besides, sending the Decepticons a direct transmission is tantamount to giving them our address. They’ll trace any message back to its source.’

‘I seem to recall,’ said Nightbeat, ‘that last time round we joined forces with Soundwave to defeat the Quintessons.’

‘They haven’t attacked us yet! I’m not making a deal with the devil on the strength of a maybe.’

‘Then what do we do? Stretch out and wait?’

‘Quite the opposite: we plan and prepare. I want every Autobot across Cybertron ready to defend himself.’

Prowl was interrupted by an incoming message. Chromedome’s head and shoulders appeared on a monitor screen. ‘*Commander, I’ve warned Siren of the potential threat but I can’t reach Autobot City. I think the sub-space message was waylaid in transit.*’

‘Could the City’s communications be down?’ asked Prowl.

‘*Possible, although it’s probably just a glitch. You remember how long it took to patch you through to Magnus before.*’

‘Keep me updated.’

Chromedome remained on screen.

‘Is there something else?’

‘*Yes. Emyrissus died en route to AMC1.*’

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’ Prowl nodded as if to back up his statement. ‘I’ll have Cremator make the necessary recycling arrangements.’ His eyes were drawn to the spot where Chromedome had stood cradling the Micromaster in his arms, and he remembered what Optimus always used to say: *one death is one too many*. ‘Perceptor, I’d like to speak to you in private for a moment,’ he said, heading for a side room.

Sideswipe watched them go. ‘Don’t look so surprised, Nightbeat,’ he said, somewhat bitterly. ‘There are secrets even in High Command.’

After a warm and uneasy silence the strategist and the scientist reappeared.

'I think this meeting is at an end,' said Prowl. 'I'll make an official announcement about Thunderclash's abduction later today. I'd like you to stay behind, Nightbeat. We have some things to discuss.'

Perceptor closed the door behind Sideswipe and returned to the table. The three of them sat in a post-argument triangle, as if clustered around a kitchen table at three in the morning. When Prowl spoke he sounded more relaxed than he looked.

'Nightbeat, I want you to know that you've been a great help to us recently, investigating Thunderclash's disappearance and uncovering a Quintesson threat.'

'Yes, well. That's what I'm here for.'

'Hm. Yes and no,' said Perceptor, rubbing invisible dirt off the table. 'Rodimus Prime did not call you up from Delphi for your investigative skills. He had a far more specific reason.'

Prowl leant forward. 'It's time we told you why you're here.'

General Rodern should have been happy. Standing in front of flickering screens, with a handcam view of the entire Autobot City battle, he should have been over the moon.

Not so.

He'd watched Autobots being brought to their knees in loose and urgent gunfire; he'd watched a black-bubbled moat become congealed with scum and crust and tingling threads of mixed-up, gobbled-up fuel; he'd watched an evening sky grow as raw and formless as a burst lung, mute with pollutants; he'd watched Tridents race across clouds smeared with arterial glue; he'd watched streets fill with fingers and cut-up faces, with jigsaw jaws and eyes as bright as ten watt bulbs.

He should have been happy, but he wasn't.

'What's it take?' he cried to the mass of monitors. 'We're decimating you! When are you going to release the titan?' He swivelled on his heels and stepped into the comms pit. 'You! Contact half the Tridents and order them ram-raid the city! I want it in ruins!'

Confronted by crowds of advancing Sharkticons, Ultra Magnus backed down a side street, path-blaster hoisted to hip-height. Death's Head and Wheeljack were either side of him, squeezing off shots to cover Blaster, who was heading their way.

'I couldn't contact Cybertron,' said the communications officer. 'And now the hall's up in smoke.'

'Dammit! Is there any way we can reach Prowl?'

'What if I generate the Space Bridge?' said Wheeljack. 'I can have half of it materialise here and the other half in Iacon.'

'But you've erased the program!' said Ultra Magnus.

'Says who?'

'I don't know about this. Is it safe?'

'What have we got to lose?'

Wheeljack held Magnus's gaze for a moment, making sure he had permission, and then climbed through a hatchway.

Deep underground, Mindwipe's world skipped a beat.

The latest in a series of earthquakes had pulled the floor from under his feet, echoed through miles of empty corridor, bounced off the Ark and dislodged the first rocks from the caverns.

He spat into his communicator while the trauma was still fresh. 'Magnus? It's me. I don't know who did what to whom, but I'm still feeling the aftershocks. Any more and the city will collapse.'

'Ultra Magnus? Can you hear me?'

'Of course, Rodimus should have been the one telling you this, but he kept putting it off. He wanted to wait until he had enough information.'

'He promised to speak to me after the inspection,' said Nightbeat, folding his arms and sinking deeper into his seat. 'Well? I'm waiting.'

'I'm sorry,' said Perceptor. 'It's difficult to know where to begin. There's a lot of background information to wade through.'

'Just show him the footage,' snapped Prowl.

The picture on the main screen looked like a photographic negative that had been nibbled by flame. Nightbeat knew that he was looking at an area of Cybertron - there were the familiar dirt-curves and stressed metal, the corrugations and corbels - but the centre of the picture was just a bright white blotch.

'What do you make of this, Nightbeat?'

'Well, the white area in the middle is spreading outwards - you can tell by the radial pattern. Obviously a corruption of some sort.' He peered closer, intrigued. 'Where was this taken?'

'Lonium, in the Acid Wastes,' said Prowl. 'You're looking at footage shot by one of our surveillance cameras.'

'Oh, then it's just a warped picture. Some sort of processing malfunction; cell-seep or chemical drag.'

'Those were my first thoughts too. But that wouldn't explain the unusual distortion up here... ' Prowl described the overlap between whiteness and the Cybertronian landscape. 'With a digital glitch you wouldn't get a picture at all.'

'I get the impression,' said Nightbeat, 'that both of you have this thing sussed already. Why don't you just tell me what you've found out?'

'Do you remember an Autobot named Throwback?' asked Perceptor.

'Yeah. He was a volunteer in your dimension-hopping experiment. He went missing for seven years.'

'He was found in Yuss about 21 days ago.'

'And what has he got to do with bad spycam footage?'

'Last week we detected a highly unusual source of energy in Lonium. It had a distinctive signature that corresponded with no known panasonic frequencies. We calculated the rate of growth and extrapolated the approximate time of origin.'

'Don't tell me. It's 21 days old.'

Perceptor nodded. 'Precisely. When Throwback phased between worlds he dragged residual energy across pan-dimensional boundaries. He circumvented the normal mass-displacement rules - Megatron's Limbo Theory - and punched a hole in space-time.'

'Okay...' said Nightbeat. 'So when Throwback returned to this Universe he brought with him a rogue pocket of energy, which is what we're seeing on screen.'

'Not quite. The Multiverse seems to have built-in safety checks, as if it's insulated against this type of energy transfer. In this case, however, I think Throwback's "rogue" energy reacted with the Underbase residue that still bathes the Acid Wastes, triggering something completely unexpected.'

'What, exactly?'

'A wormhole. A self-contained gateway that - are you okay, Nightbeat?'

Nightbeat was rubbing his temples. 'A wormhole? You're telling me you've found a wormhole in the Acid Wastes... I thought wormholes were *massive*.'

'This one's special. It can transport the traveller through Space *and* Time by attuning itself to psychic impulses. You mentally select where and when you want to go, step into the portal and you're there.'

'It's a glorified time machine,' summarised Prowl. 'And as every other time machine was destroyed in 2009, after the Time Wars, it's the last one on the planet.'

'We've pinpointed its exact location,' said Perceptor. 'It's inside a First Church temple.'

'This is all very interesting,' said Nightbeat. 'But you still haven't told me where I fit in. Did Rodimus want me to investigate this wormhole? Wouldn't that have been better left to your tech-heads, Perceptor?'

'Rodimus wanted you to accompany us. You have specialist knowledge of both trans-temporal and pan-dimensional portals: it may have been over twenty years ago, but your part in retrieving Megatron and Ratchet from non-space has not been forgotten. Rodimus recommended you most highly.'

'Your mission was to be quite simple,' said Prowl. 'Travel to Lonium, make an on-the-spot investigation and then collapse the wormhole. If the Decepticons discovered a naturally occurring time portal all hell would break loose. We originally wanted you gather data and then shut it down safely.'

'Originally?'

‘Things are different now. Your mission was called into question the moment Rodimus was injured and Thunderclash went missing. Now it looks like we have an army of Quintessons poised to invade Cybertron... we’re living in a different world to the one two days ago.’

‘What do you want me to do?’

‘There’s no easy way of saying this...’ Prowl was making subtle gesticulations with his hands, weighing up words. In the end he put it to Nightbeat as casually as he could:

‘We want you to bring back Optimus Prime.’

Ultra Magnus ducked underneath enemy fire and landed belly-down in a trench. Arcee was already crouching in the mud and metal, frantically trying to repair the rocket pack in her lap. A headless Sharkticon smoked quietly by her side.

‘Clamper and Fly-by-wire are dead,’ she said simply. ‘Springer’s OD’d on RustBuster™ and the obs tower is crumbling. We’re losing, Magnus. We have to do something.’

‘I know.’ Ultra Magnus looked at the lasers skimming overhead and leaned into his wrist communicator. ‘How are things down there, Mindwipe?’

‘Bad. No, scratch that: they’re very bad. The caverns are on the verge of collapse and the moat has already sprung a leak. We’ll be flooded in—’

‘Listen to me. I want you to initiate Endgame.’

‘Endgame? You mean Metroplex? I can’t do that.’

‘Nonsense. I gave you the boot-up codes on your arrival.’

‘But awakening Metroplex... The City’s unstable enough as it is without tampering with its foundations.’

‘Mindwipe, we’re being slaughtered up here! Activate Metroplex this instant or I’ll have you on the first shuttle back to Darkmount!’

Nightbeat felt Prowl and Perceptor’s eyes bearing down on him, trying to read his expression. Eventually, something soft and inaudible slipped from his lips.

Prowl cocked his head. ‘What was that?’

‘I said you’re out of your mind.’

‘Now come on, Nightbeat, don’t just dismiss this out of hand. I know it’s a lot to take in.’

‘A lot to take in?! One minute you’re showing me surveillance footage, the next you’re asking me to go back in time and get Optimus Prime? Has either of you thought this through? Perceptor! How can you even entertain such an idea? And you, Prowl – what in Primus’s name made—’

‘You want to know why?’ snapped Prowl. ‘You want to know why I’m sending you? Because I shouldn’t be leading us. Not with the Quintessons about to attack, not with Rodimus hurtling towards shutdown, not with all... all this mess. The Autobots need proper guidance, proper direction.’

‘But *Optimus Prime*?’

‘You think I haven’t searched for an alternative? Optimus is the only one who can lead us against the Quintessons. We need him.’

‘But...’ Nightbeat looked to Perceptor for guidance. For sanity. ‘But you can’t just nip back in time and borrow somebody. What about causality? What about the timeline? God knows what could happen!’

‘You’re overreacting,’ said Perceptor. ‘As Prowl says, we’ve given this a lot of thought. This is a way to “borrow” Optimus and return him without altering the timeline. You travel back to the Ark while it’s buried under Mount St Hilary, before the eruption reactivates the crew. You bring him to 2012 and, after he has aided us, you deactivate him and return him to the Ark, thus allowing the timeline to continue without any interruption.’

Nightbeat re-ran the theory in his head. ‘Wait,’ he said. ‘If Prime is destined to fight in a future war, why did he never mention it to anyone? Why didn’t he mention it to you, Prowl, his best friend?’

Perceptor reached under the roundtable and took out an intricate contraption. ‘What if Optimus never remembered his experiences in 2012?’ he asked, holding out his hand. ‘This is the end product of a top-secret project we’ve been working on since Mindwipe defected. It’s a prototype mind-purge, designed

to reprogram cerebral circuitry. It uses Psychoprobe technology to locate memory files pertaining to short-term recall and rewrites them.'

'In short,' said Prowl, 'it wipes out people's memories.'

'Ah, I see... so I go back to 1984, grab Prime, throw him into battle against the Quintessons, wipe his memory, deactivate him and dump him back in the past. You make it sound so reasonable.'

'There's no need to be flippant,' said Prowl.

'Flippant? Prowl, I'm not the one suggesting that we resurrect a robot who's been dead for twenty-five years just to give us a helping hand. By the Golden Spires, what if Prime dies in 2012?'

'He's not going to die,' said Perceptor.

'How can you be so sure? We're talking about dropping the Autobots' greatest warrior into an intergalactic war zone! The next few weeks could be the most dangerous of our lives!'

'Prime will not die in 2012. He has to survive in order to return to the Ark and be reactivated by Aunty. If he didn't, we wouldn't be having this conversation.'

'I can see you're not convinced by your own argument, Perceptor. What about parallel universes – the very places Throwback spent seven years exploring. Much as you'd like to graft rules and logic onto time, the fact remains that all we have is a handful of theories.'

'It's not as if our race have never time-jumped,' said Prowl. 'Perceptor's theories are based on evidence.'

'What about the moral implications? What gives us the right to snatch Optimus and expose him to more warfare?'

Prowl was prepared for this. 'I see it differently,' he said. 'Optimus is destined to die in 1987 when a human computer programmer blows him up.'

'He was rebuilt in 1988,' said Nightbeat. 'He lived until 2005.'

'His "resurrection" doesn't count. Powermaster Prime was based on a copy of the original's personality. My Optimus died in 1987, three years after he woke up on Earth. The way I see it, we're giving him a chance to live that little bit longer... I knew him, Nightbeat. I know that he would cherish the opportunity to live again, whatever the circumstances.'

'It just seems so—'

'What would you do?'

Nightbeat thought of the object inside his chest. 'What would I do? I... I'd probably...'

The room fell silent for some time.

'Nightbeat?' said Prowl softly. 'We need an answer.'

'Okay. Okay. I'll do it.'

'Well done. You've made the right decision. You'll need to take a team with you. Take your pick.'

'Hoist, Grapple and Sunstreaker. They're good men. Experienced.'

Perceptor handed over the mind-purge. 'You can use it in two ways,' he said. 'Either attach it to the back of the subject's head for guaranteed interface or activate the field generator here and create an outside flow, a wider range. You should only need the former method: I doubt Prime will try to run away.' The joke fell flat. 'I suggest you keep the mind-purge in a protected area – perhaps your chest compartment?'

Nightbeat took the device and slotted it into his waist.

'You're to head for the Acid Wastes immediately,' said Prowl. 'Once you've reactivated Optimus, brief him on the situation and bring him back here. We'll plan our next move then. Good luck.'

Nightbeat hovered at the door, as if something had just occurred to him, but in the end he simply nodded to his superiors and left.

'He had some good arguments,' said Prowl.

Perceptor did not take his eyes off the empty doorway.

'I know.'

```
+++ BOOTUP SEQUENCE GAMMA TWO INITIALIZED +++  
+++ DEFENCE CODE [W.C.S. "ENDGAME"] +++  
+++ CLEARANCE GRANTED [UMAGNUS BETA ZERO] +++  
+++ FULL BODILY CONTROL ON-LINE +++  
+++ DEPLOY_ +++
```

Like self-healing skin, the vault door re-stitched itself and cauterised the hole in the wall. Xenon listened to the slabs as they nuzzled and tightened: pure tessellation. He liked to think that the door could withstand anything: lasers, drill-bits, path-blasters, nuclear detonations, meteorites, the expansion of space itself. It was anti-environment. It was entropy-proof. It stalled the Unsteady State.

‘Is everything all right, my Lord? You look concerned.’

Xenon watched Haxian approach from a connecting corridor. ‘It’s nothing,’ he said. ‘I was merely checking to see whether the drilling had damaged the Cargo, but everything’s intact. Any news of the invasion?’

‘Generals Rodern and Quantax have yet to contact me.’

‘No matter. I am sure everything is in hand.’

‘Absolutely. There is nothing to worry about.’

‘I am not “worried”, Haxian.’ Xenon floated down the corridor. ‘I have every confidence in my troops. It’s just that so much depends on this invasion; so much hinges on the next few days.’

‘Will we win, my Lord?’

‘Yes! Yes... I hope so. We have to.’

‘You don’t sound convinced.’

‘There is always the chance of defeat, no matter how well planned the strategy, no matter how powerful the armies.’

‘Yes, there is always that risk.’

‘Except this time we will not have another chance. We’ve poured all our resources into this. If we lose, there’s nothing to recover.’

‘I would have no more of this nomadic life,’ said Haxian. ‘Wandering through space, trying to colonise, jumping from one barren rock to another. Now I know how the Progenitors felt after the Raid.’

Xenon laughed. ‘How can you? You were a Neoseed. But don’t worry, you shall have your new home. Cybertron is wasted on the Cybertronians. It has become a shadow of what it was, and what it can be again.’

They stepped inside the Teleport Chamber, where a fat cylindrical generator ran from floor to ceiling. Ragged cords of propolax danced behind glass, struggling to escape. The two discs in front of the generator supported a complete set of body armour, from headset to boot-jets.

Xenon walked to a row of recuperation booths and inspected a sleeping body, soft and post-natal, fermenting in womb-juice and sweet lubricant. ‘Is this the one that was wounded?’

‘Wounded is too strong a word, my Lord. He was merely disorientated. He mumbled something about an explosion before passing out. I think the Teleport Armour suffered more damage.’

‘Can it be used again?’

Haxian examined the headset under the generator’s maddening light. ‘Shouldn’t be a problem. It’s simply a matter of recharging it.’

‘And the prisoners are still off-line?’

‘Yes, both of them. Hyperspatial teleportation with a full set of body armour is painful enough – imagine travelling as a passenger.’

Mindwipe was not generally known for being calm.

From Autobot to Decepticon to Autobot again, he had a reputation for ravenous scheming, for double-cross and back-stab, but not for composure under pressure. This went some way to explain why he was sitting at a computer console, optics blurred with concentration, screaming.

The chronometer leant over his head like a guillotine poised for release, like Damocles’ sword, its poisonously bright digits racing toward zero. The last time he’d dared to glance up the LCD had flashed ‘2:36’.

That was *years* ago.

The floor would not keep still. It throbbed and quivered, as if pumped with anabolic steroids. It even looked sweaty under the strip-lights, under the balding bulbs. He had to ride each pulse and ripple to stop his fingers from pressing the wrong keys: one glitch in the Endgame program, one typo, one misplaced

ellipsis and Metroplex would wake up semi-paralysed, or blind, or stupid, or a wide-eyed combination of all three.

He may have successfully activated the start-up code, flooding the leviathan's pea-sized brain with electricity and jolting his sluggish CPU to life, but preparing him for battle was the real challenge; when his fist shattered the central precinct he had to know where he was and what he had to do.

1:34. Mindwipe kept on screaming.

To the left of the '1' and the right of the ':34', security screens flashed pictures from around the City. Sallow with fake light, with cheap and borrowed colour, they showed not what was happening above ground (all those spycams had been destroyed) but what was happening below: torrents of water were crashing through cracks at the bottom of the moat and filling the underground caverns.

1:25

The base of Level 31, half a mile underground and the lowest point in Autobot City, began to subside. Titanium slabs were teased and tousled. They left their moorings without argument, spurred by the earthquakes.

1:11

Mindwipe punched in the final commands, stopped screaming (his vox box was dripping with overheat) and made for the transmat. Skullcruncher and Triggerhappy had long-since teleported outside. He did not bother resetting the co-ordinates. Sure, there was a chance he might materialise inside a steaming mountain of wreckage, but so what? Better to die as a ripple of mashed-up molecules and double-space than wait for several million tonnes of hardware to fall on top of him... and what was the hell was that noise? Oh. Perhaps he *was* still screaming.

0:59

The moat water cheated its way inside, splitting in two to outsmart the dumb and crumbling rock. It begged and burrowed until the worried seam collapsed; the first few red-hot droplets bounced off the nose of the Ark.

0:57

Mindwipe crouched on the displacement disc while the office warped into marigold and chestnut, gold and vermilion.

0:26

And... stop.

Ultra Magnus gave up. The wreckage blocking the entrance to the research building refused to be moved. The only way to reach Wheeljack was through the central precinct, and Metroplex's imminent arrival ruled out that route. All he could do was hope that Wheeljack had reached the relative safety of his workshop, deep inside Metroplex's bodyshell.

He transformed and thundered across the City, across the craters and the cratered.

0:09

Back in robot mode, he broke into a final sprint and abandoned the City's inner plateau, leaving Sharkticon crowds to puzzle over the sudden disappearance of every Autobot within a quarter-mile radius.

0:01

Metroplex was awake.

He was groggy and hung over, but he was awake. Behind his eyes, a ball of wire-wrapped soft-circuitry shivered like a stalled heart, like a hand-pumped cardio-clump filled with test-toxins and gum from unlabelled bottles. He straddled the divider between dead and alive: only the tracts of scathing energeon inside his brain tipped the balance.

Metroplex was awake, and he was in a very bad mood.

Outside, Ultra Magnus and his men watched Autobot City blur into a clenched fist of gold. Buildings collapsed and spread themselves thickly over the central precinct. Sharkticons ran for their lives.

Ultra Magnus sensed trouble and looked around. Why was the ground heating up? Standing on the outermost perimeter, they were supposed to be safe. No buckshot or flash-flame; they could crouch here,



ducking Tridents, and watch the Endgame in action. So why was smoke escaping from cracks in the ground?

He knew why: their battle had warped the City. Release plates, de-pressurisers, collapsible holding chambers, failsafe catches – everything had been crimped and skewed and joined at the hip. Something had to give, and it did. Thin streaks of fire outlined every fault line, and then 839 explosions removed the pressure locks en bloc.

The City itself was bronzed and bare-chested: pumped with fire and air, it flexed and heaved and, finally, tore itself apart. A ring of light fled the base of the explosion and crossed the moat, the marsh, the mountains. Tridents were skinned and gutted, deconstructed layer by layer. The central precinct boomeranged into the sky, Sharkticons clinging like fungus to its moistened bark.

A rippling pillar of flame punched a hole through low-lying cloud. When the smoke cleared, and the screams died, and the sun lay dull and defeated behind the mountains, Metroplex stood to his full height, smoke rising from acres of bodywork. He stood there, burnt and brutalised, while the fading daylight hacked out his monstrous silhouette.

He lifted his head and it seemed like the end of everything. The sky was full of competing colours, as if someone had tipped the world and emptied its gutters. Tridents bobbed in the dew, waspish and drugged on sugar, waiting for the sting.

And there was the Enslaver, hiding behind the mountains.

Pulling his leg from a warm puddle of wreckage, Metroplex stepped clear of his coffin and began walking towards the enemy ship.

‘It’s, er, heading this way, general.’

‘Excellent!’

‘Perhaps you did not hear me, General Rodern: the titan is coming towards us.’

‘I heard you, trooper! Take us in! Re-route all energy reserves and prepare for transformation!’

Outside, Rodern watched the more energetically stupid Quintesson pilots go in low for the killing blow, their hot heads bulging with the fifth-generation vid-cap pap they’d been brainwashed with prior to launch. Every grunt had been spoon-fed ‘genuine frontline footage from the CyberWar of 2008’ – footage that had been dragged across the cutting room until fuzzy and frosted, until Ghyrik’s Last Stand had been MTV’d into a glorious near-victory. The proto-freaks and low-grades really bought into all that gung-ho crap, but then they really were the runts of Gnaw’s litter; they were there to make up numbers and catch bullets in the head, to soak up laser for the commandos and wep-heads. Barely sentient, this stunted breed of Neoseeds were little more than facsimile constructs: a low-watt brain-box, pilfered mem-files and an upright body, life story as follows: on-line, ID stamp, gunplay, mission download and bang! Seal them into Tridents, fuse their hands to their joysticks and flush the buggers into battle: that was his philosophy.

The wiser ones – the mid-graders and eco-marines – held back and fought with photon; laserfire rippled across Metroplex’s bodywork like raindrops on glass. Their target, however, did not register feeling, let alone pain. Sceptics on the bridge of *Enslaver* began to wonder whether their enemy even had a nervous system. Perhaps he was merely a city-sized puppet, a cold-wired colossus animated by orbital satellites or subterranean magnets the size of tectonic plates.

Rodern watched and waited. When the last pilots had steered their Tridents into Metroplex’s bodywork he leant back in his seat, crossed his arms and said, ‘Fire.’

Every weapon on the Enslaver rose to the occasion: thermal lances, turbic lasers, quad-cannons, excet-flares, DD-guns, PVTs, air/air shredders and row upon row of fragmentation bombs.

Not every shot hit home, of course, but Metroplex bore the brunt. In seconds, his body was as grey and cratered as a lunar landscape. He bowed his head and held out his hands, as if shielding himself from headlights. The pain raced through his fingers, through his arms, through his shoulders and into his scalp, searching for the pool of consciousness.

A moment of concentration was all it took for him to activate his own arsenal. Grubby shoulder plates folded away and multi-barrelled proton cannons swivelled into position. Chest plating was jettisoned to reveal thousands of splinter missiles, racked and ready, tight as spikes on a running shoe. MASER cannons sprung from his upper arms and glowed in the twilight.

With one tiny mental command, Metroplex fired back.

Rodern was so preoccupied with winning (he'd already pictured the Titan's planet-quaking collapse and was now planning his victory parade on Cybertron) that he missed the retaliatory salvo. The return blast nearly skinned the ship. He was thrown across length of the bridge.

'Keep firing!' he yelled. 'We'll get the bastard yet!'

Wheeljack woke up in his workshop and rubbed his aching cerebral casing.

Ouch. The world was turning cartwheels and he felt more dead than alive. He focused on the two dead Sharkticons and the smoky holes in their chests. He had been shot in the back before he could seal off his workshop, and now...

'Wheeljack! You're awake!'

'Centurion? What's going on?' He saw someone behind the Terranoid. It was Mainframe, hunched over the main computer. 'What are you two doing here?'

'We saw you being chased by those guys. We're inside Metroplex.'

'I guessed that. What's Mainframe doing?'

'I'm trying to work out how to activate the Space Bridge!'

'Let me. What's the situation outside? Where are we?'

'About ten miles from the city. Metroplex hasn't reached the mountains yet. I managed to patch into his optic network, so we've got a pretty good view.'

Wheeljack looked at the world through Metroplex's eyes and took notes: the shape of the mountains, the angle of the horizon, the slope of the land. The Bridge needed space to materialise; he didn't want it wedged into snow-capped rock or facedown in the ground.

'Programming co-ordinates now,' he declared.

Metroplex paused. The Enslaver had stopped firing. Now it just hung in the air like a wounded bird. He wondered if the battle was over. True, Tridents were still scratching and pecking at his eyes, but they were inconsequential. Was the mothership itself about to go down?

And then he realised that no, it wasn't about to go down, it was just changing shape. Retractions, extensions, rotations; a skin was shed and bones were reset. Weapons were discarded or withdrawn, the rear thrusters split into crescents and the ship's stomach folded like a concertina. The Enslaver had transformed into a floating cannon, and now it was taking aim.

Metroplex took a step back as the first shot clipped his shoulder. His arm hit the ground like a skyscraper dropped from orbit. He squeezed the wound and snuffed the sumptuous fireball, but the damage had been done.

Rodern doubled up with pleasure and jabbed the trigger button again. There was no second blast. 'What's happening? Why isn't it working?'

'We need time to recharge, sir.'

He hammered away. 'How long?'

'Considering the power of the initial blast and our depleted energon reserves I—'

'How *long*?!'

'About forty seconds.'

Meanwhile something was happening near the foot of the mountains. Wheeljack's prototype Space Bridge was trying to materialise but it couldn't get its act together: there was only a vague suggestion of girth and girder, a blurred imprint against the grey-blue rock. The air rippled as the bridge slipped in and out of sight.

Inside Metroplex, Wheeljack swore and attacked the keyboard. Centurion heard something about an unreliable Cadmium Drive and quantum foam and backward numbers. Mainframe buried his head in his hands.

The Bridge tried once more to compose itself. This time the sun's rays did not pass through; they began to collide and reflect. Eventually a rectangle of star-flecked darkness settled into position, a tantalising

glimpse of the Other Side. Another world had been superimposed onto the landscape, like cinefilm on a whitewashed wall.

'I programmed the other half to materialise next to the Jekka amphitheatre, a few miles from Helios,' said Wheeljack. 'The power surge alone should get Prowl's attention.'

'Then what? He sends reinforcements?' Mainframe looked at the chronometer on his wrist. 'Isn't that a bit of a long shot?'

'Yep. Got any better ideas?'

Rodern stopped playing with the crosshairs (what next, he thought: a head shot or a full-on body blow?) and frowned as he saw the Space Bridge. 'They've activated some sort of portal,' he whispered, half to himself. 'They're trying to escape! How long before we're recharged?'

'Right about... now.'

The second blast sliced through Metroplex's midriff like a bullet through rice paper. A column of fire spewed from his stomach and he crumbled, hugging the hole.

'They're killing him!' said Centurion. 'Do something, Wheeljack!'

Wheeljack leant into a microphone. 'Metroplex, it's me. I know that you're in pain. I'm going to make it stop.'

The room shook as a dozen Tridents dumped their payload into Metroplex's open wound.

'The Space Bridge has materialised, co-ordinates 050900. I want you to head towards it, Metroplex. Start walking towards it now.'

Metroplex did as he was told. He walked. He was slower than usual, and the sunlight speared his body, and the Tridents picked at the gristle, but he walked. The Space Bridge, meanwhile, was smudged at the edges and losing focus. Cybertron was growing pale and emaciated.

The Enslaver turned forty-five degrees in preparation for the next shot.

'Ignore the Quintessons,' said Wheeljack calmly, 'and keep moving.'

Metroplex's placed his boot on the lip of the Bridge.

Rodern fired.

The laser snapped Metroplex clean in half. Smearred with flame and blissfully off-line, his upper body toppled headfirst into Cybertronian airspace and crashed into the Rust Sea. When the Space Bridge disintegrated all that was left behind were the giant's legs. They looked like twin tower blocks, bone-white and derelict, as if they had been there for decades.

For Metroplex, the war was over.

Soundwave strode towards Darkmount's communications centre, admiring himself in the mirrored floor. He liked the way the overheads laced his face with gossamer, the way his shadow fattened him out.

Yes, it was *good* to be in command again.

The culmination of his second term of office (2008-2009, after a few months in the mid-'80s) had seen the Decepticons claw back quadrants of Cybertron that Shockwave had once deemed irretrievable: Ibex, Kortex, Vasc, Londor, Tene: all but one of the main Autobot city-states had fallen while he was in charge. Without Galvatron's rampant paranoia (two hundred innocent Decepticons murdered for taking part in non-existent plots to spike his energon) and Shockwave's fragile, house-of-cards strategies (sixty days trying to push an 87% success projection up to 88%) the army had grown robust and confident... Conquering Cybertron would have been but the first step.

Oh, and they had come so close... as always, Iacon was the last remaining stronghold (he often thought the Autobots would sacrifice all of Cybertron to hold onto their capital). By late December 2008 he was ready to launch the decisive attack. Iacon's weak points were mapped and memorised and the army was carved into regiments. Even the Primal Prophecies seemed to be on his side, speaking of 'the great apocalypse'. He'd taken the Terrorcons to Earth to siphon the energon needed to power the Detonator

tanks that would form the brunt of their assault force. A team of Autobot high-rankers had intervened, destroying the siphon, and then the Time Wars got in the way. Well, if you're going to be distracted...

He was captured on his return to 2009 and thrown into an Autobot City cell. While he sat and stared, a newly revived Galvatron took control. The grand plan was scrapped and Galvatron began to devise his own strategy, a unique method of conquering Cybertron that would be attributable purely to him.

Even when he was freed, he'd kept his anger tightly under wraps. No outbursts, no grudges, no loose-lipped comments. Any outward sign of disapproval would be interpreted as an act of mutiny punishable by death. He vowed to sit back and wait, to keep track of the Resistance (not easy after Autobase was totalled and the renegades went underground) and, when he had command once more, remount the assault.

In blowing his cover Doubleheader had simultaneously beamed a tracking signal to the Decepticon comms centre. Outgoing messages of any kind were usually pounced on by the Autobots' tech-heads, but who would think to scan for rogue frequencies while Rodimus Prime is being slagged? And so they now knew that the Autobots were inside the Archives Centre, a few miles from Helios, nudging the outskirts of Iacon. It was time to finish what he had started.

He entered the comms centre. Officers stood and saluted.

Astrotrain pressed his palms together and smiled. 'All squadrons are ready for mobilisation, commander. The aerial fleet is fully fuelled and we're ready to attack.'

'You wanted to see me in person to tell me that?'

'No, there's something else. A few moments ago Blackbolt detected a power surge in the Rust Sea region.'

'Energy signature?'

'We got a partial. You want a guess? A portal, maybe even a warp-bridge.'

'This warrants investigation.'

Tricoder pointed at his screen. 'Commander Soundwave! I'm detecting a hyperspatial exit point!'

The night sky above Northern Polyhex had split apart and something was forcing its way through.

Ultra Magnus knew that he'd just witnessed his last chance of victory disappear – literally. His Autobots knew it too, and the Sharkicons; everyone was fighting with punch-drunk vigour, as if suddenly all the rules had been rewritten. Nothing mattered anymore. It was lawless.

'Don't look so worried,' said Death's Head, loitering on the sidelines. 'It could be worse, yes?'

'Worse?! I can't contact Cybertron, half the city's destroyed, Metroplex is dead, our Space Bridge has imploded and we've got a floating space gun hanging over our heads. How can it get any worse?!'

'Don't get it, Magnus. Why don't you just run away?'

'What, and abandon the humans to their fate? Not an option.'

'Think about it, eh? The Quintessons aren't here to kill the humans. They're here to kill you. If you run, they'll follow.'

'Fine! Except how the hell are we supposed to—'

He stopped.

He remembered.

He opened his wrist communicator and said, 'Autobots, prepare to evacuate the city. We will congregate near the remains of the command tower and from there proceed to the Ark. Do not engage the enemy. Retreat is your main priority.' He looked at Death's Head. 'That sounded cowardly.'

'In which case you make a good coward, yes?'

Conquest, the Quintesson warcruiser, having pushed its way out of the hyperspatial portal, had come to standstill a hundred miles away. It balanced on the horizon line, black and angular. Tridents hovered around it like flies.

The Decepticons stood to attention outside Darkmount, waiting to see what would happen.

Soundwave was up front, crammed into one of 200 Detonators, staring at ship in the sky. Behind the tanks was the Aerial Corps: 800 high-flyers and cloud-crawlers that formed one of the most formidable

fleets in the galaxy. Guarding Darkmount itself were the gestalts, neatly alphabetised, Abominus thru Predaking. They cast shadows on the ground troops, on commandos like Blitzwing and Metrocon, Roadblock and Titax – bug-eyed gun-lovers who locked themselves in their rooms to polish their bulging weaponry.

Sygnel clutched his laser pistol, balanced on tiptoe and looked at the rows of Decepticon warriors in front of him. He saw wings, fins and war paint, faces turned skyward and boot-jets sparking up for the big push. Although blessed with an aerial mode (albeit a shaky stop-hop tri-wing), he was glad he'd never qualified for the AC. At least the rejection had allowed him to concentrate on engineering. He wished the weapon clamped between his fingers were an arc-welder or a laser scalpel, and that he were a good few hundred miles away.

Soundwave slid the Detonator's crosshairs into position and waited. There was no rush. He'd reacted to the hyperspatial breach like Galvatron, with his fists and feet, spearheading the charge onto the battlefield. Now he thought like Shockwave: watch and wait, see who fires the first shot. Perhaps the Quintessons weren't here to fight?

A blast of coppersy wind hit the battlefield, clammy and rootless. It curled between thousands of mechanical bodies, tested their rigidity and clawed back into the sky. In the distance, the Quintesson fleet remained motionless, as poised and glossy as a photo finish.

'Look at them, Quantax! Beautiful!'

On the bridge of the Conquest, Jolup bathed in the glow of the huge monitor screen and the close-up of the Decepticon front line. 'All of them gathered in one place, in one spot! You cannot waste this opportunity!'

'Be patient,' said Quantax. 'Savour their confused, frightened little faces.'

'Frightened?' Ryknia pointed to Soundwave's huge head. 'They don't look frightened to me. They look like they're going to attack us.'

A technician looked up from his console. 'Receiving a transmission, General Quantax.'

'Patch it though, Q-219.'

'This is commander Soundwave,' said the figure on screen (although the voice and face were slightly out of sync). 'I know who you are. State the reason for this violation of Decepticon airspace or we shall be forced to take action. You have three seconds to comply.'

Jolup laughed.

'Three.'

Quantax reached for the trigger button.

'Two.'

'Is everyone ready?' he asked.

'One.'

It looked like a flare, urgent but harmless – just a crimson flash low down on the Conquest's belly. But then it stretched into a laserbeam and hit Darkmount with the force of a comet. The base burst like a water balloon, spraying the ground with flame.

Soundwave's forces were plunged into disarray. Some instinctively ran for home, but Darkmount no longer existed. In its place was an open coffin and a mound of bones, picked clean, scrubbed raw, wrapped in orange and red.

Autobot City was no more.

It had given up the fight, so to speak, when Metroplex had punched his way free and ended a four-year residency as the HQ's sentient core. Autobot City was not only dead, it had already been cremated, and its ashes had already been scattered. Scrape back the powder and underneath were the bullet shells, the bright white missile casings, the empty clips and the engine oil.

The Autobots ran towards the command tower, ramping over ridges and crawling from craters, their injured friends strapped to their roof racks like battered luggage. Ultra Magnus led the way, bunting Sharkticons aside and waving weapons the size of mini-Autobots, his eyes betraying a feeling of nonchalance and extreme psychosis. His chop 'n' change, off-the-shelf Flamebirth features – all white-steel

and set-square, as was *de rigueur* back in '86 – did their best to reflect this, but didn't fare too well. It was well outside their repertoire of expressions, for a start. Right now, Magnus was firing off some very odd psychic signals, placing him firmly in some no-man's land between emo-BF#0281 (shell-shocked resignation) and emo-BF#1029 (pathological need for vengeance). They coped the best they could, activating all the necessary pulleys and levers, nudging the physiognomic templates into weird new shapes – it made the City Commander look as if he were chewing a Nebulan.

Bullets flew like woodchip as the Autobots ducked inside the command tower – or what was left of it ('what was left of it' being a depressingly familiar qualifier in these post-Metro days, these days of rubble culture and wasted land).

Cliffjumper and Snarl guarded the entrance while Magnus counted heads. Those that could stand stood to attention, their bullet-bruised, hole-punched faces the texture of acrylic paintings.

Ratchet and Fixit traded tools and glances as they pulled wires and patched wounds. No one spoke, but then no one had anything to say – just the occasional grunt or whimper, the universal mouth-sounds of pain and sufferance. Some Autobots deliberately annexed their vocab units, preferring to remain strong and silent while everyone else broke down; it did little to quieten the voices in their heads.

'We don't have much time,' said Ultra Magnus redundantly. 'I want everyone to head for the Ark. The vacuum lifts will be totalled so we'll use the walkways.'

They ran through a side-door and headed for the stairs. Hound was the first to descend, and the first to find the water. Knee-deep and heavy with chemicals, it clung to his legs and smelt unclean.

'The moat's leaked into the city,' he said. 'Is the Ark equipped for deep sea take-off?'

'Of course,' lied Magnus, rummaging underwater. 'There's an access hatch down here that leads to level two.'

Ebony lowered herself through the floor. Beachcomber was next (letting out a scream as the water attacked a gash in his leg; in response, a few more Autobots made the snip between sensornet and voxbox), and then Freeway, Bluestreak, Cosmos...

The others fell into a loose line while Magnus climbed back into the tower to check the barricade.

Nightbeat pressed himself against the mouth of the cavern and watched the quiet Iaconian landscape.

On good nights, when the sky was clear and the bombing stopped, Iacon looked as if it was draped in silk: dark blue, smoothed around the edges, dead to the touch.

It was almost dawn: the sky was red and rested.

He looked North and saw the transcontinental freeway, nicknamed the Scud-Run by the travellers who had been pelted with missiles during the early days of the war. Thousands of miles long, it had been Prima's greatest achievement, a looped steel thread that stitched together the planet's expanding colonies. From here it ran through Korten, Mismia, Londor, Kalis, Tyrest and Mytharc (nicknamed Slaughter City after the Asphalt Wars; six thousand Decepticons had been liquefied when Triax went nova). It barrelled into Tarn then Vos, traced the chapped lip of the Rust Sea, skirted the Terbium plains, brushed the Mercury Bayou, cut across Tene and split Mismia down the middle... but how many craters along the way? How many war-wounds and skirmish scars?

He sometimes thought that Cybertron was being chipped away, shrivelled by the micro-nukes and thud-bombs. One day someone would trip a landmine in Iacon and see the Primal Chamber through the hole.

He looked South to the Cadmium Mountains. Beyond them, the Golden Dome, once Circuit One's crowning achievement, now little more than a giant crushed eggshell. How long since anyone had been near that place? They said it had been rigged and trip-wired by Trannis after the council massacre in 9<sup>th</sup> Cycle 940; they said it was held together by a web of landmines so sensitive they would fling you through orbit if you crossed them with your shadow.

He looked East, where the local Empties were huddled round a meagre flame, their starfish hands painted pink. The wind changed, the stars shone a little brighter, and he saw what was happening: they were pulling wires from another Empty, from the fire in his chest, searching for sugary lubricant or lighter fuel. How many Empties were left, anyway? Despite the claims made by the ever-growing number of holocaust-deniers, millions had died in Straxus' cleansing campaign. And yet here they were, the next

generation of burnouts and scroungers, multiplying in the dark. Cybertron: a multi-cultural melting pot of cripples and cannibals.

At one time – the low-point a few years back – he would have crossed over to see the Empties. He would have sat down, torn off his Autosymbol and let time and terrain wear his bodywork down. A simple life: hiding from Decepticon brat packs and scavenging for curdled fuel, prodding bodies and swapping stories. Facedown at daybreak, face-up at nightfall, until one day your cerebral circuits ironed themselves smooth and your brain quietly clicked itself ‘off’. How many AWOL Autobots and Decepticons ended up choking on spiked fuel in Emp communes?

He wondered why was it so quiet. Even the spatter of distant gunfire had stopped. He imagined a lone Decepticon checking his chronometer, packing up his rifle and jetting back to Darkmount, another day’s work done. It had been a good few minutes since the last explosion – they were usually far away, somewhere in the Dead End ghettos; the timid flash, like a heat-bump on the horizon, and then, a moment later, the hollow thunderclap.

He picked his way into the cave. Only yesterday he had been desperate for any information about his new mission; now he was desperate to forget it. Whenever a germ of protest formed in his mind, some valid argument against doing what he was about to do, he thought of his friend, of snow and ice and responsibilities.

Footsteps. Perceptor climbed into the cave followed by Grapple, Hoist and Sunstreaker. ‘Sorry I’m late,’ he said. ‘There have been developments. The Quintessons have invaded Polyhex.’

‘It’s started, then. When do we move in?’

‘If you’re implying that we should send Autobot reinforcements...’

‘Magnus aided the Decepticons last time. I was one of his team.’

‘Ultra Magnus is not in command anymore.’

‘So what’s Prowl going to do?’

‘He’s waiting for more information before he makes a decision. He wants to know how the Decepticons are faring before putting his men at risk.’

‘What if it’s too late? What if the Quintessons take over the planet?’

‘Ultimately, Nightbeat, it changes nothing. The Autobots are no better or worse off. The Resistance still resists, the Rebellion still rebels, except this time the oppressors are different.’ He didn’t like the look on Nightbeat’s face and decided to change tack. ‘Do you have the mind-purge device? Good. Grapple, Sunstreaker and Hoist have been fully briefed.’

Nightbeat turned to his teammates. ‘I trust you’re all comfortable with this? No one is forcing you to join this mission, least of all me.’

They nodded and smiled and waved their heads dismissively.

‘Good!’ said Perceptor. ‘You’re all programmed with the co-ordinates of the Celestial Temple. It should take less than a day to reach Lonium if you use the Scud-Run. If anything goes wrong, anything at all, contact me immediately.’

Nightbeat led his team out the cave and turned to Perceptor. ‘If you look out the window and see a massive rift in time and space, take that as a cry for help.’

Slap-bang as he was in what would one day be known as the Polyhex Massacre, Blitzwing should have been thinking about the quirks of aerial warfare. He should have been thinking about the tricks of the trade he’d been picking up since being surgically separated from his morph-twin all those years ago (coming on-line to find himself in the throes of mech-meld wasn’t funny; Fulcrum’s experiments with morphcore division may have led to the rediscovery of biomorphism, but they’d also led to their fair share of stillborns).

He should have been knuckling down and playing his part in trying to repel the Quintessons – a part learned over the course of countless training simulations (Sbridge86, Lunar88, Swarm94, Quint08 and the uniquely coded Twars89/09) under the tutelage of Snarler and Ratbat. The trouble was, he never really learnt any strategic lessons from the ComSims; he just revelled in the mayhem.

It was the same right now. He was far too busy marvelling at the chaos of it all, at the mad scrabble of aircraft clogging up the sky, to think about his place in the larger scheme of things. He was content to wade in and start firing.

He eased his shadow over a nearby Trident, locked his cannons, and sent a batch of phosphex missiles down a pre-set firing line. He wasn't ready for the retaliatory shot, which clipped his wing and sent him spinning. The fire reached his fuel tanks before he had a chance to react. He caught only a glimpse of the ground before his world collapsed.

Soundwave saw his lieutenant crash into Mt Kyth without concern. What difference did one more man down make? Devastator's back was ablaze after a close-quarters Trident attack; the Pretender Monsters were having difficulty maintaining their combined form; and there was Trypticon, little more than a carcass, flame-stems rising from his open belly.

All Soundwave was interested in was the Conquest. It was heading towards the battlefield, moving closer to ground level as it did so. As Tridents moved out of its flight path, leaving themselves wide open to enemy attack, he realised what was about to happen. He'd got as far as pressing the communicator on his shoulder when cluster bombs started to drop from the warcruiser's underbelly. It looked as if the Conquest was spraying crops – until the first wall of fire sprang up in the distance and started surging forward.

He was frozen to the spot. Panic squeezed his every circuit, pinned back his optic covers and made him watch, aghast, as the crowds in front of him became one with the tidal wave of flame. He saw the rest of the Air Corps flying away from the carnage, pursued by Tridents, all of them ignoring the desperate screams of their earthbound comrades.

It was only then – when the fiery talons were within slashing distance – that he turned and ran.  
It was too late: he was consumed.

On the bridge of the Conquest, Jolup was laughing. Of all the Quintesson officers he was the most enthralled, the most aroused, by the destruction below. The ship was cruising on an ocean of fire and he was loving every moment of it.

'Ah, Quantax! I would have spent a lifetime in stasis for this!'

'General?' Q-219 synthesised a cough. 'We are down to our last block of cluster bombs.'

'This campaign is nearly over. Continue bombing until the entire area has been cleansed.'

Ryknia turned away from the screen. 'Don't you think you're being a little... overzealous? The battle was going favourably enough before... before all this. We had more regard for subtlety in my day. Patience, guile, strategy – these things used to matter.'

'Your strategy against the Cybertronians led to a profoundly embarrassing defeat, Ryknia. And that is why I am giving the orders and you are a mere spectator.' Quantax turned to Q-219. 'Casualty projection?'

'I estimate that between 60 and 65 per cent of the Cybertronian army are dead or will die from injuries within the next hour.'

'I will need a more accurate figure if I am to report to the Majestrix. Once the surface has cooled have the Death Squads sift through the wreckage.'

'How many Quintessons were killed?' asked Ryknia.

'You must remember,' began Quantax before Q-219 could answer, 'that there is always an element of sacrifice in campaigns such as these. A depleted air force was always part of the equation.'

'I'm impressed. You can trivialise the deaths of, what, half our men and still make it sound noble.'

'I don't have time to argue. If one thousand Quintessons die killing a single Cybertronian, so be it.' He beckoned Q-219. 'Recall all pilots, then deploy a recon team to scour the immediate area. We need to begin the second phase.' He turned to the three Quintecons. 'Jolup, Ryknia, Sevax – you three are integral to the second phase.'

'What do you want us to do?' asked Sevax. 'Go down there and search for survivors?'

'Nothing so base, I assure you.'

'Good. Because we didn't come all this way to clean up your mess.'

'I want you to explore the planet – a geographical survey, if you will. Stick to the northern territories. Find me an abandoned complex, preferably well hidden.'

'I don't get it,' shrugged Jolup. 'What are we looking for, a base?'

'No, this isn't for us, Jolup. It's for them. Remember Xenon's motto: Now as Then.'

'You mean the Harvest?'

'Exactly. Only this time round, we're going to do it *right*...'



The water was all fingers and thumbs; it was oiled and coiled and it refused to stay still. Ultra Magnus groped his way down the lift shaft, his one good headlamp giving out damaged light. He imagined the pressure forcing cold wet snakes into his wounds, looking for the crack in the CPU, the exposed kill-switch, the rattling morphcore.

Being a hero and all, he had stayed behind. He had stayed behind to wait until the Sharkticons had poked their lime scale fingers through the barricade. Everyone else had slipped through the hatch as if bailing out of an aircraft, but no, he wanted to be sure. A few gunshots and a fresh barricade had given his men a head start, but where did that leave him? Skimming down the ribs of a vacuum lift, that was where; running for the Ark while ten cybersharks chased his bubbled spume.

He felt something stroke his waist and punched water 'til his headlamp found its target. Water surged against his vocal aperture as he screamed.

Wideload's ravaged upper body was wedged into the wall. His stomach ended in teeth marks, and loose metal tendons shimmied around his spinal strut like seaweed. Magnus moved on, feeling sick (emo-CT#0291 - easy, thought his facial features, and warped his expression accordingly; the whole disgust/repulsion thing was a piece of cake – just as Eskimos have hundreds of words for snow, Flamebirth scientists program their creations with hundreds of ways of expressing repulsion: par for the course in a post-Decepticon world).

The lift shaft opened onto the Ark's launch pad. The golden spaceship stood on its end, pinned against scaffold. Spotlights danced across its hull and the water shimmered with gloss and glitter.

Ultra Magnus swam for the airlock, oblivious to the Sharkticons pouring from the shaft.

As the Ark was standing upright the bridge had swivelled ninety degrees to accommodate the angle of take-off. It was full of bodies, dead and alive, slumped in corners, laid across consoles, stacked like unwanted gifts. Ratchet was moving from body to body, wrists covered in medical accoutrements.

Hubcap, Outback and a barely functioning Cliffjumper were slouched over the navigation consoles. Silverbolt sat in the pilot seat wrapped in a set of guidance machinery so rigorously sculpted that it was virtually a second set of body armour.

Slouched in the co-pilot's seat and practically black with damage, Mirage leaned towards him and hissed, 'Where the hell is Magnus?'

'Give him time,' said the Aerialbot. 'The quad-thrusters haven't powered up yet. We should be able to take off in fifty.'

Death's Head stood up in the background. "'Should'? What do you mean, "should"?"

'Firstly, the Ark isn't equipped for underwater take-off. Secondly, you saw the debris that's piled up around the City. Thirdly—'

'There's a thirdly?'

'Thirdly, awakening Metroplex warped the City's infrastructure. The Ark may not even be able to break through the surface.'

Mirage slapped his palm against his forehead. 'Couldn't you have mentioned this to Magnus *before* we swam down here?'

'Slaughtered by Quintessons or dying in an exploding spacecraft – you end up with the same result.'

'Good attitude,' said Death's Head.

'Oh grow up, bounty hunter.' Mirage swivelled in his chair. 'Hubcap! What's the situation topside?'

'Funny you should ask, actually. The Sharkticons seem to be abandoning the City...'

'They're running? You mean that's it? We've won?'

Death's Head fastened his seat belt. 'Can anyone say, "evacuate"? Where exactly is the Quintesson mothership, Autobot?'

'Give me a few seconds...'

The last engines came on-line. Ratchet watched the light die in Powerglide's eyes and laid him gently between Jazz and Springer, who was foaming at the mouth. There was a clank of metal on metal as Cliffjumper collapsed over his console; his arm dangled towards the floor. People stopped talking and started listening to the noises outside.

Hubcap tapped his screen. 'Got it! The Quintesson warcruiser is moving towards the – ah. It's positioned itself over the City. Directly over us, in fact.'

Mirage got up and started pacing, looking for something to hit. He looked at Death's Head.

'Still waiting for the ignition sequence to kick in,' said Silverbolt, anticipating the question.

'What about Magnus?' said Hound.

'We'll have to take off without him. We can't risk waiting. Look Hound, he's probably dead...'

'Thanks for the vote of confidence,' said Ultra Magnus, stepping out of the airlock and onto the bridge. A pair of Sharkticon jaws were clamped around his arm like a sprung trap. Additional bite marks described a dark crescent from armpit to abdomen. 'Nice to know where you stand.'

'Right! Good!' Mirage slapped Silverbolt on the back. 'Now let's get out of here!'

The floor tilted backwards and the bridge levelled itself. Loose bodies thudded into the far wall and the overhead lights cut out.

The bridge shuddered as the thrusters were ignited and the surrounding water reached boiling point. The Ark lunged for the surface, breathless and panicked, lost in water-ribbons, awash with pocked rock and shreds of screaming phosphor.

It skidded up the launch shaft, scraping the sides, and with a final, almighty lunge, it smashed clean through the surface of the city.

To be fair, Rodern did not expect a four-million year old Autobot super-cruiser to burst from the debris of a ransacked City, spinning like a firework and shrugging off flaming wreckage, and so what happened next was not down to timing or cunning or hair-trigger reactions, just one dumb chance-in-a-million:

The Enslaver fired.

The laser bolt missed the Ark but sliced through the remains of the City, finding resistance inside caverns and minerals and twisted geo-strata.

Autobot City was burnt off the face of the planet.

The Ark was swallowed up by the explosion, by the quivering heliosphere that ballooned towards orbit. Viewscreen shields fell away like scales and banks of flame rolled naked against the plexiglass. Everyone screamed as the Ark outpaced the explosion, ram-raided the Enslaver and gunned for the stars.

Some time later, while the Autobots were still staring blankly at their laps, too traumatised to speak, Silverbolt steadied the engines and gave the all clear.

Ratchet eased himself from his seat and began to unpack the mound of bodies at the end of the bridge. Functioning Autobots on one side, deactivated Autobots on the other side, undecideds in the middle.

'How bad is it, Ratchet?' asked Ultra Magnus.

'What am I going to do? A quarter of them are already dead...'

'Take a look at this, Magnus,' said Silverbolt.

'What is it?'

'I didn't want to announce it in front of the others, but it looks as if the Quintesson warcruiser is moving towards Earth's orbit.'

'They're giving chase. Damn. I didn't expect them to recover from the collision so quickly. How long until we can break into hyperspace?'

'Immediately. But I'd like to run some damage checks before I initiate the jump.'

'There's no time. We have to rendezvous with Prowl and the others. God knows what it's like on Cybertron.'

Ultra Magnus rounded on the rest of the bridge. A few mini-Autobots were slumped over their naviposts. In the corner, something unpleasant – rust? – was seeping from Springer's eyes. Mirage stopped pacing from workstation to workstation, sat down on the floor, and put his head in his hands.

'Hyperspatial interface in 0.2 seconds,' said Silverbolt quietly.

The space outside became goose-pimpled and waves of light curved towards the Ark. Ultra Magnus listened to the starship rattle and whine as another Autobot coughed up oil in the background.

All he could think about was Earth, and how he would never see it again.

‘We fell into a rhythm. Arms races followed by massive conflicts. We’d pepper each other with all kinds of super-exotic weaponry in delightfully elaborate successions of thrusts and feints and counters. But in the end nothing could match the hit of central thermonuclear exchange. We always ended throwing everything we had at each other, in arsenal-clearing deployments. After the devastation, we rebuilt towards another devastation. No complaints. Shelter culture had come on a long way. Casualties could be patched up good as new. And fatalities were simply resurrected – except, of course, in cases out outright vaporisation. The lulls lasted centuries. The battles were over in an afternoon.’

**Martin Amis**  
*‘The Janitor of Mars’*

‘Of most interest is a report I have received from Fulcrum, our morphcore specialist. As you now, he has spent the last few months comparing the handful of tests run on our sample with the descriptions of spontaneous replication found in the Primal Pentateuch’s more accessible passages. He believes that this so-called “biomorphic” reproduction is not only possible, but that it was once practised by everyone on the planet

The theoscientists are bleating on about genetic memory and the sanctity of some Primal mind-gap designed to obfuscate this method of auto-procreation. They say that attempting to create life outside the Matrix is blasphemous; they say we were never meant to get this far. I spit on their concerns. This is an opportunity to spread our influence across the galaxy.’

**Extract from Trannis’s annual address to the Decepticon High Command,  
50 years before the Great Exodus**

‘No Autobots.’

**Sign outside Maccadam’s Oil House, circa 4 million years BC**

## The Antiholocaust

*Earth – 5th January 1986*

Soundwave jabbed a finger at the fleeing Autobot spy.

‘Laserbeak! Deal with him!’

Bumblebee stumbled down the ravine, leaping strips of shadow and cursing an earthen landscape he had yet to master. How could he have been so stupid? Pursuing Ravage across the desert in a misguided effort to prove himself to Optimus Prime, and stumbling blindly, idiotically, into a Decepticon ambush. He had been foolish and impetuous, and any moment now it was going to prove fatal.

Laserbeak let his prey run for a moment, happy to spectate, and then launched his flare missiles. Bumblebee was knocked wide by a three-tiered explosion. He landed badly and mumbled to himself in an effort to articulate the pain.

Soundwave watched from a distance, frowning while his subordinates laughed out loud. Rumble, Frenzy, Thundercracker and Skywarp were easily amused, but their laughter betrayed a nervous tension. They had been hiding inside this rocky enclosure for six hours, waiting for the Autobots to arrive. They had expected Prowl or Hound or Prime himself, but Bumblebee? Bumblebee was a joke. So much for carefully laid plans.

‘Skywarp – he’s yours if you want him.’

Skywarp disappeared into the desert’s heat shimmer while Soundwave led the others into the open.

Thundercracker was content to let them go on ahead. He had no particular desire to see them murder an Autobot, particularly one as feeble as Bumblebee. He looked at the watercoloured sky and considered flying back to the Fortress, but thoughts of Soundwave’s reaction – a dressing down as scathing as the one given to Starscream earlier that day – kept the dust on his feet.

‘Hey! Thundercracker!’

He recognised the voice and turned. Another Transformer was hiding in the shadows, beckoning him over. Another Autobot? Could it be that Bumblebee had not come alone?

‘Come out of the shadows... Frenzy?’

Frenzy moved into the light, dragging a larger robot in the dirt behind him. ‘Hi, Thunders. Long time no see.’

‘Where’s Bumblebee?’ said Thundercracker. ‘You, er, sort him out?’

‘That close,’ smiled Frenzy, squeezing his thumb and forefinger together, ‘And then this piece of junk comes outta nowhere and tries to put me down!’ He dropped the body. ‘Soundwave’s dealing with the minibot.’

Thundercracker crouched and prodded the bright blue mechanoid, which he’d only now realised was an Autobot. ‘Who the hell is this?’

‘You tell me. Soundwave thinks it’s one of those “ultimate Autobots” Ravage told us about this morning.’

‘*This* is an ultimate Autobot? Big deal.’

‘You said it.’ Frenzy kicked his prisoner in the stomach with undisguised relish. ‘Right old heap of junk. Ugly, too.’

‘You okay, Frenzy? You look kinda beat up yourself.’

'Me? Yeah, this is just... I got this, er...'

The body groaned.

'Thunders, there's something I want to show you.' Frenzy dragged the prisoner towards a slit in the canyon wall, where strange lights were disturbing the thick spread of shadow. 'I've found some weird energon deposits, pure crystal, tucked at the back of this cavern. Here, you go first...'

*Cybertron – 24th December 2012*

'What the hell are you doing to him?' cried Kup, lunging at the intruder, arms flailing. His optics were cold and luminous, like oil on tarmac.

First Aid waved a conciliatory hand and stood his ground. 'Don't panic, Kup. I'm only disconnecting the ones he doesn't need.' He looked at Rodimus Prime's body, which lay between them like an anointed corpse. 'Only the ones he doesn't need...'

Kup folded himself back into his chair and pressed his palm against his head. He couldn't take much more of this; he was jumpy and fatigued – the humans would have said he was over-tired, or in shock, or both. In descending order of bodily deterioration there was function-failure, there was overheat, there was circuitburn, and then there was *him*. How many more times could his jaded little lifespark complete its ancient circuit? How many more times could it tunnel through circuitry that was already outdated when the First Ones birthed their successors?

No wonder he was over-tired; no wonder he was in shock: 37 hours casting a shadow over his best friend's body and then First Aid storms in and starts pulling out cables...

'Sorry, doc, but you gotta admit it looked pretty strange.'

'You need to rest, Kup. Shut yourself down for an day or two.'

'Not until Prime's out of it.'

First Aid began stripping another life support machine, disengaging fat green tubes and looping them roughly round his hand. 'Prime doesn't need this hardware now,' he reiterated, switching off screens.

'You're saying he's getting better?'

'I'm afraid not. He's slipped so deep into his coma that it's just a matter of keeping his energon levels steady. And we only need one machine for that. You're looking at a case of progressive deterioration, Kup, and it's difficult to—'

'How's the patient doing?' Prowl strode into the medi-vault looking as if he had a hundred other jobs to do.

'I heard your speech on the intercom just now,' said Kup without looking up. 'Are you sure it's wise to hide away in Autobot base while the Quintessons decimate half the planet?'

Prowl studied Rodimus' bodywork with affected scrutiny. 'If you'd attended the last command meeting,' he said, 'you'd understand my strategy.'

'I have more important things to do than rearrange items on an agenda. Since you started playing Dead Man's Boots all we've had is this...' He mimed a chattering mouth with his hand. 'When are you going to make some real decisions?'

'Bickering like Virroids over a vial of Hypergrade isn't helping Prime,' said First Aid. 'Let's leave the infighting to the Decepticons, eh?'

Prowl withdrew as Search and Rescue wheeled trolleys through the door. 'I have matters in hand. I just wanted to check on him, First Aid. I'll leave before I get in someone's way.'

A few seconds later, Prowl was walking into Ward B. Red Alert was tucked away in the corner, practically nailed to his circuit slab, heat-wrinkled and scabbed around the mouth. Prowl felt a pang of shame for not visiting sooner. *Sorry Red, affairs of state and all, you know how it is.*

The Security Officer was staring at a ceiling that seemed to mirror the dents and fracture lines in his face. Prowl groped for an opening line but Red Alert beat him to it.

'I'm sorry, Prowl, I—'

'What are you saying? You haven't done anything wrong.'

‘Rodimus and Thunderclash should never have got hurt.’ Red Alert’s voice sounded like a bad recording, a ghost in a machine. ‘Their safety was my responsibility and I let them down. I let everybody down. I’ll understand if you want me to resign.’

‘On the contrary, I need you back on duty as soon as possible. Who else is going to oversee our defences?’

While Red Alert didn’t smile, he at least tried to sit up. ‘I heard your speech before. You really think the Quintessons will invade again?’

‘They’re attacking Polyhex as we speak. They no doubt intend to turn their attention to us, but they have no way of knowing our location.’

‘You said the others were reinforcing the Archives Centre in case of an attack,’ said Rev-Tone, who had been eavesdropping. ‘Is there anything else we can do to prepare?’

‘I have matters in hand, Rev-Tone. No one has anything to worry about.’ Prowl turned back to Red Alert. ‘I should let you concentrate on getting better. First Aid says you’re well on the way to a full recovery. I just wanted to come down here and... you know. I’ll see you later.’

He left the ward without looking up.

Galvatron came back on line quietly and without fanfare. There was no blaze of red-raw sparks, no primal howl, no thunderclouds scudding across the sky; just a subtle changeover, a silent switch from A to B, and consciousness stirred deep within his processors.

He knew he was captive, that much was easy: he could see the prison bars, coated in energy, and behind them just a lonely corridor (his whole life, he thought fleetingly, was composed of corridors and cells, throne rooms and thrones). Still, this was no Autobot prison, and it certainly wasn’t Darkmount. He was hanging from a wall; he could feel electro-bonds around his wrists and ankles, imprinting a dark glow.

No matter. He would transform and—

*Wait.*

He couldn’t transform. Something had brushed against his morphcore when he’d tried to initiate changeover, something hard and spindled. He pressed himself against the wall and felt a growth in the small of his back: an Inhibitor Claw.

*Patience.*

He saw a rusting heap of robotic limbs in the far corner of the cell and realised that it was Longtooth’s dead body. He wondered idly where the Pretender’s shell was.

He looked the other way and saw his fellow prisoner for the first time. Thunderclash was a mess. He looked slapdash and semi-realised, like a child’s portrait; a mass of poster paint and cut-out shapes. Behind the sticky styling and the primary colours were half-melted body plates and soiled circuitry, as if someone had dunked him in molten lava. Only the Autobot’s optics held their form.

Galvatron checked his own body and smiled: he was virtually unharmed. True, there was the odd scratch on the arms, the flake of paint on the torso, but nothing serious. Why, then, was he in such pain? Was he injured on the inside?

He heard someone approach and screamed, ‘Release me this instant! Whoever has done this will burn in the acids of Unicron’s maw!’

Q-6 appeared behind the bars, shrank back as he saw the prisoner, and sprinted down the corridor.

Galvatron dug his fingers into his palms. The soldier’s face had been enough. He remembered. He remembered it all.

*The throne room in Darkmount. His thoughts were heavy with plans and counterplans, with the dynamics of treachery. His decision to promote Sixshot instead of Pitchshifter had, in retrospect, been foolish. Images of mutiny and rebellion dragged him deeper into self-absorption, until he finally conceded that he had made a mistake. Yes, Squad 117 or not, he had made a mistake. He’d summoned Soundwave with the intention of demoting Sixshot. And then: a spasm of light. A rush of noise that had driven him to his knees. A blurred figure exploding into the room – a Quintesson who had slammed something into his back, paralysing him. Another flash of light, then darkness, and then—*

The Quintesson had obviously teleported him here. It was impossible to know how far away from home he was, but surely Cybertron was nearby... After all, teleport armour couldn’t carry you across interstellar space, could it?

Xenon appeared outside the cell and poked his tentacles between the bars. 'Galvatron! Awake at last! I thought you'd never come round.'

'Release me, Quintesson, and your death will be quick and relatively painless.'

'A cliché, Galvatron. I expected better... I quite liked the "relatively", though.'

'Where am I?'

'Aquaria.' Xenon shut down the bars and swept into the cell. 'A very long way from home.'

'If you planned to kill me, you didn't do a very good job.'

'If I planned to kill you, you'd be lying face-down in your throne room, your head split open and your brain smeared like putty across—'

'Yes, yes, yes. Who are you, anyway? I thought the Quintessons were extinct.'

'My name is Xenon. There are thousands like me, thousands who survived the CyberWar.'

'The CyberWar? Oh, you mean that skirmish a few years back? Is that why I'm strung up here? Revenge for something you started?'

'Revenge? Partly, I suppose, but not just for 2008.'

'Come on then, Xerox. Hit me with the Grand Scheme.'

Galvatron recoiled as a tentacle etched a hair-thin cut from temple to chin. Oil oozed from a severed duct and smeared his lip.

'Don't mock me,' said Xenon, pressing his tentacle against the bridge of Galvatron's nose. 'Next time I will hit you here, and press until I pierce your brain. You're useful, not essential. There's a difference.'

'Why have you brought Thunderclash here?'

'Comparison.'

Galvatron nodded towards Longtooth. 'And this one? What happened to him?'

Xenon did not answer. His tentacles were flashing around Thunderclash's head, kneading the air into a lime-green halo. Galvatron watched in amazement as his captor removed cranial casing and performed thumbnail surgery on the neuronet underneath.

Thunderclash convulsed as a thousand frayed neuro-synthesizers exploded into life. His body shuddered and slapped the wall.

'Welcome back on line, Autobot' crowed Xenon. 'How are you feeling? I know you can hear me and I know you're in pain. If you'd like the pain to stop, I suggest you stop screaming.'

Thunderclash snapped at the air, his optics flickering like cheap TVs.

'Thunderclash!' snapped the Quintesson. 'Calm yourself! This is no way for a Matrix Bearer to behave.'

The Autobot relaxed. He had no choice: his stim-synths had cordoned off the ravaged avenues of his body. He was vaguely aware of his surroundings: the loose rust of a tawdry cell, bars coated in pale blue icing, a bobbing sphere.

Xenon moved back to admire his prize specimens. 'How perfect. The two supreme leaders of the Cybertronians strung up and helpless.'

'I don't know who or what you are,' said Thunderclash, clearing his voxbox, 'but I think you've made a—'

'Shut up, Autobot! You think that Xenon wants to hear your mewling?'

The Imperial Majestrix regarded Galvatron with suspicion. 'Groveling won't save you.'

Haxian appeared at the door. 'Sorry to interrupt, Lord Xenon, but the operating theatre is prepared. If you'd like to check the equipment...'

Xenon slid outside, reactivated the electrobars and sloped off.

'He said "operating theatre", Galvatron. What's going on?'

'That was Xenon. We've been captured by the Quintessons, who are no doubt poised to re-invade Cybertron. I think Xenon wants to cripple both factions by abducting their commanders.'

'But I'm not—'

'I know. But if Xenon assumes everything is going to plan it puts him at a disadvantage. Rodimus will have time to muster some sort of counterattack.'

'You're pinning our hopes of rescue, and of a Cybertronian victory, on Rodimus Prime? On someone you despise?'

'You're still new to our war, Thunderclash. It has its own rules, its own codes and practices. Rodimus is my opposite number, and yes, I would gladly see him dead, but that doesn't mean I don't respect him. I certainly don't underestimate him.'

'You'll be saying you don't hate him next.'

'I don't – at least not in the way you think. I hate what he stands for and I hate the obstacles he has put in my way. As a person he is undermined by certain principles such as mercy and compassion. I'm not saying these qualities are wrong in themselves (I practically let Starscream get away with murder, and there are occasions where it pays to feign compassion), but they have no place in war. Maybe I should be grateful that he does exhort these "virtues" – if he didn't, he might pose a threat. But no, he's a slave to the Autobot Code, to this spurious concept of freedom. That's his weakness. That was Optimus Prime's weakness, too.'

'Well, it's academic now. Rodimus is dead.'

'What?'

'He was assassinated. Doubleheader – if that was his real name – was wired up to a bomb.'

'Typical. You wait two hundred years for an opportune moment and it comes along at a time like this.'

'You think it's funny?'

'You don't?'

They fell silent and stared at the floor. Thunderclash shivered as his morphcore rejected a command. 'Why can't I transform?' he said, fearing the answer.

'Some sort of Inhibitor Claw. I'm wearing one too, somewhere on my back.' Galvatron watched his cellmate knock himself against the wall and, after he had gleaned sufficient entertainment, said, 'That was my first reaction too. It's no use. The claw is too well protected.'

'What are they going to do to us? Before they kill us, I mean.'

Before Galvatron could reply, Xenon reappeared, surrounded by Sharkticons and a stretcher.

'Who's first for the operation?' asked the Majestrix. 'What, you're not even going to nominate each other? Very well. The decision falls to me.'

He looked from one Transformer to the other.

'I pick *you*.'

After a while, Treadshot got used to living in an upside-down world. It wasn't as if though he had much choice, what with being impaled on the end of a crashed Trident. His wrists dangled closer to his heels, his head tipped further back, and his world wobbled on its axis. His open mouth caught embers as they drifted across the battlefield.

The echo of the last cluster bomb had only just swallowed itself up. He listened instead to the distant crackle of flames and the moans of the dying.

Darkmount hung from the horizon like a molten stalactite. For five million years it had stood noble and alone, face to the sunrise, back to the sunset, a mocking, granite-grey headstone overshadowing billions of Autobot graves. Now it was blurred with flame, a barnacled stump lost in gridiron and girders.

Everything had been turned on its head.

He tasted oil in his throat aperture, nicotine-thick, and slid a little further down the spike. The battlefield was filled with bodies of every colour, every shape, like butterflies pinned in place. He scanned the leftovers, looking for Soundwave, and then remembered that this field of gore, this crumbling circle of hell, represented just a fraction of the thousands that had died that day.

Time passed. He heard the dry hum of spinning turbines, of cold-fusion engines throbbing into life. He lifted his head expecting to see stars, but the sky had become a vault of metal and artificial light, full of base thrusters, hatchways, docking slots and gun turrets.

He was staring at the underbelly of the Quintesson mothership.

Colossal cones of light swept over the landscape, merging as they changed direction. The ship stopped over a relatively uncluttered stretch of land and three Decepticon jets bolted from the hold. They headed towards the Mount Kyth.

He'd doubted the last few hours had actually happened – the fall of Darkmount, the death of Soundwave, the inferno racing over the planet's crust – but now he knew he was seeing things.



Decepticons collaborating with the enemy? Surely something had malfunctioned in his head; surely his mem-net had been cross-wired with retro-data or backlog scurf: he was hallucinating; he had to be.

The Conquest descended on a cushion of anti-grav beams and settled in the tattered sinus between Mount Kyth and the Polyhexian Plains. Dark metal supports slid from the base and took hold. The core structure expanded and contracted like an artificial heart, and soon the spacecruiser was transformed into a five-faced fortress.

Heavy doors slid apart and clean-up vehicles – Tenderisers – rolled out into the open.

The vehicles weren't pretty – little more than a pale green cab, a mulch-basin, caterpillar tracks and a plough – but when Treadshot saw them, he understood. Over the years he himself had thrown countless Autobots into the mincing jaws of a Harvester Unit (or a Sanitation Tank, as it was known under Straxus; most people just called it a Meat Bin) and stood, arms outstretched, as he had been sprayed with ribbons of robo-pulp. The Quintessons' Tenderisers were of similar design: near the back, a stainless steel funnel guzzled mech-waste, inanimate or otherwise. Rotor-blades and block-hammers mashed up the cadaver before storing it, near-liquidated, in a barrel underneath the cab.

There were about forty Tenderisers in all, although he wasn't in the mood to count. They moved sluggishly towards the main spread of bodies, as if poking around cold food. Quintessons emerged from their newly-settled base carrying pincers and flame-throwers, white sticks capped with a raw blue flame. They rummaged in boxes that hung from their hips. He wondered what was inside.

Two troopers were heading his way. His head clicked sideways to get a better look and his spinal strut edged closer to his brain module.

'This is Q-218 to Central Squad,' said the larger Quintesson into a comms device. 'We've found a survivor. Possibly a straggler.'

*'Grill him, then scan him. I don't want this to take too long.'*

Q-218 cocked his head. 'Can you hear me, Cybertronian?'

The wad of oil should have hit the Quintesson in the face. Despite Treadshot's best efforts, it trundled down his own chin, warm and aimless.

'You know where the Autobot headquarters are,' continued Q-218, 'and you are going to tell me.'

Oh good, thought Treadshot: a moral dilemma. He knew he was going to die, one way or another, in a matter of seconds. He knew there was minimal chance of taking any Quintessons with him. He knew he didn't much care for honour or sacrifice or the greater good. But most of all he knew that however much he hated the Quintessons, he hated the Autobots a hell of a lot more.

'Iacon.' The word almost drowned in the lube swill and mouth clag. 'The Archives Centre. It's underground. Near the Helio Generator Complex.'

'We have a possible location, control. Do we have the co-ordinates of the Helio complex on record? Excellent. Q-218 out.'

'Can I scan him now?' asked the smaller Quintesson.

'He's all yours, 220.'

Q-220 swept a palm-sized device over Treadshot's body. '68%,' he said, sounding pleased.

'That's 12% below the recyc threshold, let alone salvage class.' Q-218 brought flame-thrower close to the Decepticon's head. 'Stay back, 220. This one's useless.'

A rush of heat found Treadshot's every nook and divot. Q-220 extended a heatproof pincer and yanked his roasting torso off the spike, and as he was lifted through the air he saw the full scale of the operation. Quintessons were looking for every Decepticon body, digging in the dirt for corpses to scan and rate. Survivors were being rounded up, tied together, and having what looked like thumb-sized Inhibitor Claws pressed into their backs. Those that could not be repaired, those like him, were being fed into Meat Bins and ground down.

He saw his own Meat Bin loom closer. He saw the spiked, rotating jaws, the flash of jagged dentistry. He prayed that system shutdown would claim him before the serrated blades set to work, but it was looking increasingly unlikely.

Q-218 dropped the reject into the maw of the Tenderiser and looked for the next straggler. Behind him, plumes of oil filled the air like streamers.

'Well? I'm still waiting.'

The officer kept his eyes on the neon contours and geo-curves scrolling across his monitor. 'I'm sure I'm close, General Quantax. There is an awful lot of Cybertron to cover. It's just a matter of—'

'If you dare complete that sentence,' said Quantax, 'I will personally put you through a Tenderiser! Time is precisely what we don't have. If the Autobots are aware of our invasion they will have time to fortify whatever rock they've crawled under. You know how it is: some low-lying surveillance droid beams front-row vidpics of the Decepticons going down and the Autobots start hammering blast-plates across their window panes.'

'Found it!' Q-7924 tapped the screen. 'The Helios Generator Complex, Central Iacon. An abandoned solar energy plant, co-ordinates 040596-070899.'

Quantax patted the officer's shoulder and felt a rush of quiet pride. In the run-up to the first CyberWar it had been his idea to record the topography of Cybertron, to catalogue every crumbling quadrant, every blue and butchered street. Sharkticon spies had gathered enough information to paste together a 3D map of the planet's surface, from the Baird Beaming Transmitter's parking lot to the proton crater slap-bang in the middle of the Scud Run; the back alley entrance to Maccadam's to the summit of Mt Edeus.

'When the Death Squads have finished bagging the leftovers we'll move to attack Iacon,' he said matter-of-factly, returning to the banks of monitors. 'We'll make the Decepticons' last stand look like a miracle of fortitude and resilience.'

*'General Quantax, this is Q-311. I'm about to take my squad and a couple of Tenderisers over the first ridge.'*

'Go ahead. The sooner we contain the stragglers the better. I want the containment blocks to be full by daybreak.'

*'One thing, General. We're running low on anti-transformation claws. There are more survivors than we anticipated – a few are hitting self-destruct, but most are just waiting around to be chained. I estimate hundreds of salvageable survivors.'*

'Hmm. We've exhausted our supply of Inhibitor Claws. Tell any Decepticons that transformation equals death – not just for them, but for the entire chain. If the worst comes to the worst, kill any survivors and leave them on the recyc piles. Relay this order to all other squads. Quantax out.'

He cradled his brow and ordered the skeleton crew of officers and technicians to leave the control room. For the first time since leaving hyperspace, he felt uneasy. Of all mechapolymorphic races, the Cybertronians were the most adept at reconfiguring; indeed, it had been because of this talent (and, perhaps, the speed with which they had suddenly abandoned peace for outright hostility) that the race had been dubbed 'the Transformers' by neighbouring cultures. They could blur between forms while an Lithonian or a Junkion was still shifting gear, their limbs splicing and dividing like liquid metal. No, he decided, the enemy could not be allowed the gift of transformation: preventative measures were essential.

He slumped into his chair and thought back to a conversation he'd had with Lord Xenon back on Aquaria a few hours before launch. The Imperial Majestrix had assured him that 'preventative measures' were well in hand, that the Inhibitor Claw's successor would soon be subjected to the final tests; they would be ready, he'd promised, before Phase Two was underway.

Quantax punched his open hand: the new Inhibitors were *essential* to Phase Two!

'Oh. Did that hurt?'

Wheeljack smoothed the indentation on his fingertip – a dimple of warm metal – and swallowed the urge to swear. He yanked his facemask over his head. 'As a matter of fact, Centurion, yes it did.' He pulled the mask back down, leant against the wall and sparked up the acetylene torch he had cobbled together earlier. Sparks bounced around the workshop.

Centurion drew his knees underneath his arms and looked around. Everything was the wrong way up: he was sitting on the ceiling looking up at the floor, with its bolted tables and dangling computer ports. Mainframe was in the corner, suspended by a shoddy metal harness, still trying to access Metroplex's CPU; all he'd managed to do so far was turn on the lights.

He decided his safest option was to keep still, listen to Wheeljack swear, watch Mainframe tap away, and take stock. Awakening from stasis, undergoing the Rite of Auto-brand, battling for the City, tripping over the Space Bridge... From the moment he'd collapsed into Ratchet's arms, events had snowballed out of control. And now he was trapped inside a dead robot on an alien planet.

It wasn't a typical Monday morning.

Mainframe gently banged his head against the computer screen. 'It's no good. I'm not getting a thing. I think the system's traumatised.' He winched himself back down.

'Is this base dead?' asked Centurion.

'If by "this base" you mean Metroplex, then yes – I think. Blast! I thought I'd be able to find something, some way of reviving his core program. To all intents and purposes, we're sealed inside a corpse.'

'At least we're safe,' said Wheeljack. 'What do you think has happened to Magnus and the others?'

'You're right, you're right. I just feel helpless.'

'Well don't get your hopes up, but I may have found a way out of here. I've weakened the wall here and here. We should be able to break into a connecting passageway.'

'I'm not, er, questioning your judgement,' said Centurion, 'but wouldn't it make more sense to weaken the door?'

With half his face still covered by the mask it was impossible to tell whether Wheeljack was amused or exasperated. 'It's not quite that simple. We came in here while Metroplex was in city mode. When he transformed, so did the interior layout, creating a whole new set of dead ends.' He sifted through the debris around his feet. For a few moments the Quintesson invasion seemed light years away and he was happy doing what he did best: tinkering.

'It's not much,' he said, weighing up the newly-built pile driver, 'but it should do the trick.' He punched a hole in the wall and was propelled across the workshop. Through the fresh hole was a kaleidoscope of surfaces, as if a dozen walls had collapsed.

It took over an hour to reach the outside world. Sometimes the Autobots ran through cavernous hallways, other times they crawled on their bellies. Wheeljack would swing the pile driver above his head and punch new holes ('Gravity doesn't lie,' he said), and freedom, when at last it came, was unexpected. The ceiling a few centimetres above their head had been identical to the one before, and the one before that. But once the slab of metal was flicked free they saw a smattering of stars.

Centurion climbed outside and onto a metal island the colour of ancient brass. The Rust Sea spread in all directions, like a thousand corrugated iron rooftops. In the distance, beyond the panel-beaten shoreline, the Terbium Plains stretched towards the horizon: a universe of metal unbroken by fuse-lines or moulding templates.

Wheeljack patted the open-mouthed Centurion on the back. 'It's not much,' he said, 'but we used to call it home.'

'Some of us still do,' said Mainframe, walking to the edge of Metroplex's torso. 'Hey guys, take a look at this.' He pointed to three black-rimmed, shuttle-sized blast holes. 'He's flooded. If the shock of separation didn't kill him, the liquid did.'

'The Mytharc burn-lands are over there,' confirmed Wheeljack, pointing west. 'If we cut through Tyrest and take the Scud to Korten... It's still a good six hundred miles before we're into Iacon.'

'Six hundred miles on foot,' corrected Mainframe. 'Only you, Wheeljack, have a vehicular mode. Of course, if we go this way...' He pointed in the opposite direction. 'We only need to cross Terbium and Portha before we reach the Sonic Canyons.'

'Okay,' said Wheeljack. 'But first let's get to shore.' He held out his arms. 'Solid-fuel rockets – climb aboard, you two.'

A few moments later the passengers were deposited on shore. Wheeljack collapsed from exhaustion, smoke rising from his forearms. When he sat upright, Mainframe was pointing to a Trident that was poking out of the sea a short distance away.

'It must have followed Metroplex across the Bridge,' he concluded. 'Thank god there weren't any more.'

'The rest of them stayed behind to kill Ultra Magnus and the others,' said Centurion grimly. He thought of Blades, Grimlock and the others. Where were they now? Celebrating an Autobot victory or lying facedown on a muddy battlefield? Perhaps it was better not to know.

Wheeljack tried to stand, clutching at his friends for support.

'You need time to recharge,' said Mainframe. 'Wheels? You okay?'

Wheeljack stumbled forward, reached for his pistol and fired two shots.

Mainframe and Centurion followed the direction of the laser to see a disoriented Quintesson pilot stumbling from the surf, weapon raised. The first shot missed him completely. The second clipped his head and left a question mark of smoke above his shoulders.

High above their heads, three Decepticon jets thundered towards the horizon.

Lonium, a suburb of Yuss, is not a good place to spend the night.

Like so many Acid Waste settlements, like so many ex-mining towns, it is utterly deserted. Frail as tinsel, grim as concrete, it is another web of scabbing over Cybertron's blood-blistered surface. No neon, no streetlight, no trans-mat depots or downtown Neut hostels, no monorails or hab-blocks, no overpasses connecting the nuke-pits and empty engen-vats. The Ampodrome is empty. Fort Scyk is levelled. Blast patterns are everywhere, and the download theatres bear crude anti-Autobot graffiti.

It is a corpse of a city, unclaimed and un-mourned, locked in permanent seizure. No one comes here; even the Scud Run veers wide, dodging the perimeter, avoiding its leprous touch.

Nightbeat drove into the precinct, closely followed by Sunstreaker, Hoist and Grapple, and looked around. There was no life here; he could feel its absence. 'The less time we're here the better,' he said. 'The Celestial Temple is a few miles north, just outside the city limits.'

'I've heard some weird stories about this quadrant,' said Grapple. 'People going missing. The ghost of Thunderwing. Viroids with syringes for fingers... Makes me shudder just thinking about it.'

'Then don't,' said Sunstreaker, who was preoccupied with memories of Stampede and the Magnificent Six. Why had he agreed to this? Was he really that eager to stare down his past?

'I heard that an entire squadron of Micromasters lost it out here,' continued Grapple. 'Only a handful made it back, and those that did were never the same. Some of them still have flashbacks. One was caught trying to rip out his CPU; Dai-Atlas found him with his hands stuffed into his chest, screaming about the Antiprimus. They say this place breeds madness. It's the Underbase, you know; ruinous Matrix energy can trigger all manner of hallucinations. Apparitions, visitations, retinal imprints, you name it.'

'Perhaps that's why the surrounding area is so popular with the religious community,' said Nightbeat. 'Nothing like a few holy visions to cement your faith.'

'You're turning into a cynic in your old age.'

'Age has got nothing to do with it, Hoist.'

'Speaking of religious nutters,' said Grapple, 'I'm sure the Celestial Temple is home to some circuit sect or other. Nightbeat?'

'The First Church of the Primal Trinity. They think the Second Coming is imminent. God knows what they made of the wormhole. They probably thought it was a sign. They won't take kindly to four Autobots bursting in and defiling their "miracle".'

'I can't wait to see their temple,' said Grapple. 'The last celestial shrine on the planet – amazing.'

'I'm glad someone's enjoying this,' muttered Sunstreaker. 'What's the plan, Nightbeat? Do we try to convince them it's a wormhole?'

'Perceptor wants us back in two days, not two years.'

'You hold a very dim view of religion, don't you?'

'There are more important things to worry about than life after death.'

There was no more talk. They drove across a desert of rippled chrome, tarmac-black under a starless sky. Up ahead, the Celestial Temple stood on a raised plateau, like a piece of Cybertron offered up to the heavens. It looked like an upturned table, with tall gold pillars at each corner. The front face sloped down gently from the transparent carapace and split to accommodate heavy double doors. Stained plexiglass circles were set into the walls like diamond studs.

As they approached, the illusion of grandeur began to fade. The walls were pockmarked and the windows heavy with turbid fallout. A weak, flickering light was trapped inside; it threw itself against the sectioned panes as if trying to escape.

'We'll play this one safe,' said Nightbeat, transforming. He ran a torch beam over the temple and tried the doors. 'They're locked from the inside.'

Hoist tapped but got no response. 'You think they went through the wormhole?'

Nightbeat admonished him with a pointed finger. 'Don't even say that.'

'I'm not prepared to come back tomorrow and see if anyone's home,' said Sunstreaker, blasting the doors of their hinges.

'So much for a civilised entrance,' said Nightbeat. 'No wonder we Autobots have a bad reputation.'

Inside, the temple smelt of rancid lubricant, hot tarmac and impure energon.

The wormhole hovered above the altar at the far end of the temple. It looked as if someone had swivelled a cigarette through the fabric of space-time. A perfect sphere with a radius of a hundred metres or so, it was a miracle of nature, a collision of Tech 12 theo-physics and black-eyed arcania. The surrounding area was winnowed and atrophied, threadbare with dead heat and missing time; it acted as a styptic, an insulator against the portal's deleterious energies.

Nightbeat felt the strength drain from his legs and his torch slip from his fingers. He was afraid. But where he was afraid, the others were enraptured – scandalised, almost, by the portal's violent beauty. They were witnessing a universal secret, a whispered myth among pilgrims and scientists, a phenomenon as wondrous as the first skin-twitch before biomorphic labour.

The floor was covered with tendrils of mist, green as candle wax, and poking through them were all manner of religious paraphernalia.

'I think you were right, Hoist,' said Nightbeat. 'I think they have gone through the wormhole.' He picked up a staff and bent it back into shape. 'I just pray they've jumped into the future: at least there they cannot endanger the timeline.'

'I dunno,' said Hoist. 'It doesn't feel right. The scanner says there's life in here, but where? Where could a templeful of First Churchers hide?'

'Good question.' Nightbeat threw the staff aside and waited for the clatter. It didn't come. He dropped to his knees and, wafting away the all-pervasive mist, uncovered a cavity deep enough to accommodate the wormhole itself. 'What have we here... A crater? Or an excavation?'

'Forget that and look up there,' said Grapple quietly. 'Look what they've done.'

The domed ceiling was plastered with greying bodies. Nightbeat thrust his flashlight into plaster and piecrust, into irregular eyes and mouths. 'What happened here? What the hell happened here?'

Somewhere behind them a dark shape dropped to the ground. They turned, they pointed their guns and their torches, and they listened as it started to speak.

*/// you have defiled this place with your presence ///*

The Guardian's voice – a synthesised murmur with the edges rubbed off – didn't match his body, which was heavysset and veined with oil. He – it – was a walking lump hammer, an endoskeleton buried under a kevlar-web of pressure plates and fractal armour. Its head was mockingly disproportionate to his body: a miniature cranium, wrapped in alloy, with pinprick optics and a mouth filled with far too many teeth. Looped around its wrists were high-rez lasers, cutters and welders – the artillery of a security droid designed to act, like so many others over the years, as the last line of defence.

Nightbeat raised his hands. 'Hi. We just want to—'

*/// heretic /// i am the chosen one /// is it not written in the primal pentateuch that the chosen one shall pave the way for the second coming ///*

Its speech patterns had been flattened into a characterless monotone: even its questions sounded like statements.

'Yes, yes,' said Nightbeat, 'but we just want to—'

Guardian fired a fat laserbolt at Nightbeat, who lunged behind the nearest pew. Hoist, Grapple and Sunstreaker did the same, and they all crouched in the shadows.

*/// give yourselves up /// surrender to the word of god ///*

'The Class 3s were recalled due to faulty programming,' hissed Nightbeat. 'They were rounded up and dumped underneath Yuss after Megadeath detonated his neutron bombs. I guess this one was buried alive. Four million years listening to the First Church must have corrupted its brain module. It's protecting the wormhole!'

The pew exploded and flicked the Autobots across the aisle. Sunstreaker slipped, skidded and returned fire. 'That's it! No more cowering!'

'Avoid the wormhole!' ordered Nightbeat, weaving between pillars and holding his pistol in both hands. 'One stray shot could vaporise us! Hell, it could vaporise everything!'

Guardian observed Sunstreaker with puzzled annoyance.

*/// you'll burn in the pit for such brazen sacrilege ///* it purred, and fired a single shot which drilled the Autobot into a wall.

Nightbeat vaulted over upturned pews and landed near the droid's feet. A three-fingered hand grabbed his throat and lifted him off the floor.

*/// repent /// prima chapter two, verse nine: whosoever desecrates the sacred shall ///*

Its quotation was cut short as Sunstreaker's laser-guided missile exploded against its rib. The impact did not move it, but the pain prompted a reaction: Nightbeat was sent crashing through the pews.

'Why did Wheeljack have to make 'em so tough?' asked Grapple, pulling his team leader from the crumpled metal.

'Back of the neck, guys!' called Hoist, tapping his own. 'A concentrated blast will shut down its CPU!'

'Okay,' said Nightbeat, 'I'll distract it while you get as close to the wormhole as you can. We'll take it from there.'

'But what do I do when—?'

Sunstreaker cut himself short as Nightbeat casually stepped out into the open, put his hands above his head, and walked towards Guardian.

'He's lost it,' hissed Grapple.

'I need to ask you something,' said Nightbeat, making eye contact. The Class 3 trained its wrist-lasers on the Autobot's head but held its fire.

*/// you dare question me ///*

'I want to know why you killed the worshippers. They were following the way of Primus and living their lives in accordance with the textural codes. Why did they deserve to die?'

*/// their faith was weak /// their spirit was lacking /// he wanted them dead ///*

'Right. So if God is so benign, why did He seal you underground for so long?'

Guardian cocked his head; engines whirred, pistons pumped.

*/// if I had not been punished i would never have discovered the way /// better to be trapped physically than mentally ///*

Nightbeat saw Sunstreaker slipping through the shadows and slowly lowered his arms. 'You're unstable, Guardian. You've sat in a hole and let the dogma seep like mech-waste into your bargain-bin brain module.'

*/// i forgive you ///*

'That's your response? You forgive me? Forgive me for what, telling you you're wrong? Rejecting Primus on the grounds that *he doesn't exist*? Denouncing your entire religion as retrograde folklore that would sound naïve coming from the mouth of a still-wet proto-form?'

Nightbeat stopped talking as Guardian's targeting laser settled on his brow.

*/// you know not what you say ///*

Sunstreaker fired, and Guardian's back burst into flame. The droid arched its spine and saw its attacker on the threshold of the portal. Nightbeat leapt onto the Class 3's shoulders and unclipped his pistol.

*/// get back /// get back /// get back /// g /// g /// g /// g ///*

The droid's head slumped to one side as a thread of smoke escaped a fresh entry wound in its neck.

'I don't know if I shot it in the right place,' said Nightbeat, sliding to the floor and thumbing back the droid's optic covers. 'But it seems out for the count. Let's put it back in its box.'

They dumped the body in the hole and kicked loose debris to fill the gaps. Out of sight, out of mind.

'And after that brief interlude,' said Nightbeat, 'we return to the task at hand.'

The wormhole was waiting. Even up close it retained its mystery. One moment it seemed tantalisingly transparent, the next it was as impenetrable as concrete. Right now, as the Autobots stood in line, their paintwork bleached by the glow, it looked like balled lightning.

Nightbeat felt ill. This was it, then. The Moment. The Rubicon. He was about to travel through time and pollute the temporal stream. He was scared; scared of altering the past, scared of dying, scared of not coming back, scared of failing.

'Okay everyone,' he said. 'I want you to think of the Ark, the central control room, Earth date 1984. The wormhole will do the rest.'

His chiselled blue fingertips broke the portal's skin and he felt a weak tug, as if his body wanted to be in two places at once, as if his molecules were making choices. He closed his optic covers, stepped into the glossy ball of energy, and disappeared.

All Thunderclash could hear was the squeak of the gurney's wheels, popping their joints and spinning 360 as they jumped ramps along the corridor. His head was fixed in place by pins and rusted bolts, and he was forced to eyeball the ceiling. Each strip light scored his ocular gauze; he dreamt he was riding the interstate highway and watching an endless ribbon of white-lined tarmac.

<Shutdown>

<Reboot>

Occasionally, a syringe-toting surgeon or one of Xenon's five faces would corrupt his view. Xenon was speaking (something about the Masters and the geode, about mecha-racial purity and the perpetuation of the sparkline, about gulags and spray-chambers and 'the evopeak itself'). He felt another quart of decal-fluid spin circles through his fuel lines. The demon liquid sluiced through his ambulatory systems, nibbling at connective circuitry. Oh god, now he was *leaking* – he could feel a warm puddle of oil collecting between his legs. How embarrassing.

<Shutdown>

<Reboot>

Time had passed. He'd stopped moving, and the ceiling had settled into a disc of frighteningly white light. The brightness burrowed through his eyes and slithered around his brain, from lobe to cranium, skimming the synapses.

Still on the gurney.

Still strapped down.

Still absolutely terrified.

'He's back on line, Xenon. He's back. Back on line.'

'Thank you, Ferrax. I want him to feel this.'

'Where am I?' Thunderclash tried to ask, but his voice sounded like a thousand whirring photocopiers. The disc of light shrank and he realised that it was actually an overhead lamp, suspended by a multi-hinged arm. A surgeon with a squint and wicked, wandering hands was standing over him. He glimpsed a set of tools, laid on a tray like body parts – in fact they might have *been* body parts, snapped off and sharpened.

Xenon loomed closer. He was holding a test tube, and somehow that seemed like the most terrifying thing in the world.

Thunderclash wished he were dead.

'Do you know what this is?' Xenon asked, flipping the tube. 'It's a miracle. It's a work of art. It's a means to an end.' He broke the seal and tipped a sparkling microchip into Ferrax's clammy palm. 'It's an Inhibitor Chip, one of the most advanced pieces of technology in the galaxy. Imagine the properties of your prosaic Inhibitor Claw, magnify a hundred-fold and condense into a single microchip. Easy to administer, impossible to remove, they can be mass-produced like cheap fuel pumps. We have enough to enslave your entire race, Thunderclash. Thousands of Cybertronians, unable to transform. And that's not all. Once injected, it—'

'It'll never work.'

'Oh, but it will. You think we'd go to all this trouble without a few little tests? We've been abducting Cybertronians for months... "Empties", in your parlance. The ones that would go unnoticed, the pacifists and the deserters: your gloriously overlooked underclass. My troops have beamed into suicide parks and refuel dens, Viroid bunkers and rehab clinics; we've picked the underside of Cybertron clean, prodding and poking, testing the Chip, making *alterations*. Then we moved up a step, targeting the armies themselves, taking Autobots and Decepticons. The Inhibitor Chip worked, Thunderclash. It worked on them all.' Xenon dragged a tentacle across the Autobot's face. 'I think you can guess what happens next.'

Ferrax started carving designs in the nape of Thunderclash's neck, criss-crossing the knuckled ridge where the spinal strut plugged the skull. Electricity rippled up the blade as the Autobot's neural cluster was exposed: a tight-packed nucleus of motorneurons, it was the morphcore that governed each Transformer's

reconfiguration circuitry. Thunderclash felt as if his entire body had been dismantled and laid bare. He knew that one slice of the scalpel, one wayward blade, and a neat pulse of energy would kill him instantly.

Frowning (or dribbling; it was difficult to tell), Ferrax loaded the Inhibitor Chip into a syringe gun and pressed the radium-coated needle against the n-cluster. The microchip crashed through the protective substratum and took root, sending urgent electropulses through the entire neural network.

Thunderclash's brain could not process these new feelings: sense-connections had been revised, stim-synths recalibrated, and now pain and pleasure were somehow interchangeable.

Assistant medics came forward, unlocked his manacles, fanned out and trained their weapons on him, looking for an excuse to fire. Xenon towered over them, waiting. Thunderclash tried to listen to Ferrax, who was mumbling something about solophyte plating, delayed reaction times and split-interfacing.

'The Chip is now entangled with your most intimate circuitry,' said Xenon. 'It is a part of you. How does it feel? Like spider's legs threaded through your skull? Like a wire fire burning behind your eyes? Get used to that feeling, Thunderclash, because the Inhibitor Chip cannot be removed.' He swished a tendril and the guards cocked their weapons. 'I'm going to make this simple. I'm going to tell you to do something and if you do not obey me these guards will kill you. Are you ready, Thunderclash?'

'Nng.'

'Transform!'

And he tried. He issued the curt mental command that he had used millions of times before, and nothing happened. There was no gear-change, no blending metal - just an exquisite paralysis that clogged him like honey.

Xenon pressed a gun to his head and started laughing. 'Transform, damn you!'

Thunderclash arched his back until his spinal strut popped its socket.

He could not transform.

'Excellent,' said Xenon. 'If the chip works on a Matrix Bearer it will work on anyone!' He turned to the crowd. 'We begin manufacture immediately. I want the first batch beamed to Cybertron within the next 12 hours. Everyone dismissed.'

The crowd filtered out as Ferrax re-attached Thunderclash's manacles. Haxian looked from the Autobot to his leader and back again. He had been rolling the following words around in his head for some time, wondering how best to phrase them. In the end, he settled for the blunt approach.

'Lord Xenon, I've heard that some Cybertronians, when seriously damaged, are unable to transform. I fear this one's mode-lock may not be entirely attributable to the Inhibitor Chip.'

'I take your point. Once we have operated on Thunderclash we will repeat the experiment on the Decepticon. He is more powerful and far less damaged.'

Thunderclash listened to them talk as Ferrax lifted his chest plate like a bonnet and started removing circuitry. An expectant Xenon moved closer.

'Incredible that someone such as yourself, Thunderclash, should carry an object of such crippling power. The future of a race, of the sparkline itself, entrusted to someone who allowed himself to be captured and experimented on. Pathetic.' He watched Ferrax unpack the top layer of micro-components. 'When I am in possession of the Matrix I shall do more than bury it in my chest.'

He fell silent as the last layer of circuitry was removed. Thunderclash was empty.

'You know what?' hacked Thunderclash. 'I think you've mistaken me for somebody else.'

Xenon unloaded his pistol into Thunderclash's chest. The theatre bounced back the sound and sparks hit the ceiling. When the clip ran dry, Xenon tossed the weapon through the Autobot's tunnelled body and stared at it on the floor.

'This is not their commander, Haxian. Tell Quantax that his spies were wrong. The Matrix is still on Cybertron, hidden in some other high-ranking Autobot.'

Haxian crossed to the door, eager to get away.

'Have the guards bring in Galvatron,' Xenon called after him. 'I need to vent my frustrations.'

The Ark's heat-dimpled inner hull twitched and simmered. In front of it, a dusty patch of recycled air curled itself into a ball and disgorged four figures. Nightbeat, Sunstreaker, Grapple and Hoist walked into 1984 as if they were balancing on a tightrope, their faces a collision of emotions.



‘Don’t ask me how we did that,’ said Nightbeat, rubbing his eyes, ‘just be grateful that we’re still in one piece and not scattered in ten thousand temporal directions.’

The control room was golden and muggy. Spears of sunlight plunged through the ceiling, freckled by ash.

‘Unbelievable!’ said Sunstreaker. ‘We’re actually here!’

‘And home is just a stone’s throw away,’ said Hoist, nodding to the wormhole. Through the fidgeting frame they could see the inside of the Celestial Temple.

‘Look at the mist on the floor,’ said Nightbeat. ‘It’s still moving. Amazing... We’re talking about contemporaneous time-streams. 2012 is progressing at an identical rate to 1984. We must be on our guard. Touch *nothing*. Tamper with *nothing*. Anything we do might have cataclysmic knock-on effects.’ He pointed to the portal. ‘If we cause any lasting changes, that future might not be the one we return to. Let’s find Optimus and get out of here.’

They switched on their torches. Filled with deactivated Transformers, the control room looked as though it had hosted a mass sleepover or a communal suicide. They picked their way through Starscream, Huffer, Ironhide and many more, careful not to crease a single circuit board.

Nightbeat froze as the overhead lights flickered into life. ‘Who the hell did that?’ he hissed.

‘Er, that would be me,’ said Hoist, resting his hand on a console. ‘I just thought that we’d be able to find Prime quicker if we could see what we were doing.’

‘That’s not the point! I want us to have as little contact with the past as possible. Don’t you realise what a dangerous position we’re in?’

‘Oh come on, Nightbeat! Hoist just turned on the lights – it’s not as if we’re going to jump forward to 2012 and find the planet being devoured by the Swarm, is it?’

‘You can’t make any assumptions, Sunstreaker. I’m edgy enough as it is without people disobeying orders and—’

‘What’s a “Sidestep Drive”?’ asked Grapple.

‘It’s a type of cloaking system,’ replied Nightbeat, exchanging a worried glance with Sunstreaker. ‘Why do you ask?’

Grapple pointed to a monitor and read the flashing message: ‘Sidestep Drive deactivated... What’s up, Nightbeat? Why are you looking at me like that?’

‘Now do you see why I’m so worried? By the Celestial Spires! We’ve been in 1984 less than two minutes and you’re already making our presence felt! The Sidestep Drive was the most advanced cloaking device of its time. Skids worked out a way to vibrate the molecules of the Ark at a speed that would put it slightly out of sync with its surroundings, rendering it invisible.’

Sunstreaker picked up the thread: ‘Optimus intended to conceal the Ark in space after we cleared a path through the asteroids. He knew Megatron would follow us. We were going to cloak ourselves, recharge and launch a pre-emptive strike, but the Decepticons attacked too soon. When Optimus set the Ark on a suicidal course for Earth he did so to prevent its secrets from falling into Decepticon hands, but he wasn’t just talking about the boarding party. He activated the Sidestep Drive so that the Ark’s remains would never be found. He wanted to ensure that no Autobot or Decepticon search parties ever had a chance to repair their comrades.’

Hoist looked puzzled: this was new to him. ‘Why would he do that?’

‘To end it,’ said Nightbeat. ‘To end the war. Don’t you see?’ He gestured at the sleeping giants, at Thundercracker, Skywarp, Brawn and the others. ‘These Transformers were never meant to be resurrected. We were never meant to get this far.’

‘Only I’ve just shut down the Sidestep Drive,’ said Hoist, ‘... and de-cloaked the Ark.’

‘Exactly. And I have neither the time nor the inclination to ponder the consequences.’ Nightbeat looked around. ‘Now where is Optimus Prime?’

Sunstreaker led Hoist and Grapple into the outside corridor, leaving Nightbeat to calm down.

As the detective looked from body to body he thought of the rumours that had circulated after contact was lost with the crews of the Ark and the Nemesis: four million years of Autobot and Decepticon propaganda. Deathsaurus spread stories of Megatron eating Prime’s brain module. Trannis, possessing a less lurid imagination, reported a total Autobot surrender then a crash on the way home. Theo-scientists had both spaceships tripping an event horizon and sliding into a pocket universe comprised entirely of sentient

antimatter, while Councillor Tomaandi leaked memos describing Megatron's passionate disavowal of the Decepticon Manifesto, and so on and so forth.

Whatever the spin, whatever the froth, it had been hard for those back home to remain hopeful.

Even now, millions of years later, Nightbeat remembered hearing that contact had been lost with the Autobots' Greatest Warrior, that the Matrix Flame had been snuffed and that the cream of Autobot special forces were officially Missing: Presumed Dead. At the time, amongst the near-compulsory feelings of grief and loss, he had felt a sense of relief. If he had been selected for Mission: Rockfall he too would have been dead, and it would have been his name sharing memorial space on Iacon's Great Dome.

He remembered the weeks leading up to Arklaunch. The crew roster was the most heavily guarded Autobot secret of its time, more classified than the location of the Council's nuclear bunker, the Wreckers' B-list or the mythical epilogue to the Primal Prophecies (the one that was said to foretell the rise of an überlord named Shokaract). Having said that, everyone knew the Big Guns were going – the surviving members of the Magnificent Six, the head of the International Medical Foundation, the playbot-turned-spy. But who else? Councillors Pladen and Troi had said that the remaining vacancies were open to any Autobot who excelled in his field. Candidates sprang up from Mismia to Tene, Kalis to Terbium. Everyone thought they were in for a chance, including him.

When Optimus had announced his selection to a packed auditorium he had been standing in the front row, brash and overconfident. The feeling of emptiness and nausea that hit him as Prime named the last name, and he realised he'd been passed over, had taken decades to fully fade. Centuries later he'd heard that Bluestreak had taken his place at the eleventh hour, and somehow that had made the disappointment even greater. Apparently he was 'not yet ready'. Other snippets of information came to light: Tailglider and Highwind were tipped to go instead of Sideswipe and Sunstreaker but were working undercover at the time. The Wreckers were held back at Impactor's insistence. Wrench was ready to assume his role as Head of Security but was shot down and killed over Vos; Ironhide, his replacement, was chosen over Kup on Prowl's advice. Perceptor was offered a place but elected to remain in Eocra. And Nightbeat... Nightbeat was 'not yet ready'.

As he had grown older and lived through the Council Massacre, the Great Exodus and the Straxian Holocaust, he had realised that Optimus had been right (surprise, surprise). He had been neither experienced nor mature enough for a place aboard the Ark. The moment the Matrix Flame flickered and died the Ark crew had become martyrs, each one a Great Hero to which the underground resistance fighters could aspire. If nothing else, the Nightbeat of 2012 knew that he would have hated being an object of worship.

He picked his way between Frenzy and Spectro, negotiated a knot of mini-Autobots, and marvelled at the madness of it all. Four million years ago he had lost a place aboard this ship, and here he was now, handpicked to retrieve Optimus Prime and save the planet.

It was an uncomfortable state of affairs.

He wondered what would have happened if he had been chosen to help repel the asteroids... would his mangled remains be spread across the floor right now? Would Bluestreak be poking around with a flashlight?

He'd always thought it pointless to consider what might have been. Possible pasts, possible futures – you might as well try to plot an infinite graph of possibilities. Except now that he had literally stepped into the past, nothing seemed certain.

Not even his own history.

'Are you sure the battle spread this far? I always thought it was confined to level one.' Grapple tiptoed down a connecting corridor, picking out the Tubes of Transference. He pressed his face against a body-pod. 'You know, Hoist, when Prime suggested we install these I never imagined... Hoist?' He saw his partner emerge from another doorway. 'Thanks for wandering off.'

'Sorry Grapple. I was checking something.'

'There's nothing in that room except for – ah yes. Of course.'

'All five Mind Crystals – you, me, Smokescreen, Tracks and Skids.'

'But why—?'

'I just had to make sure that they were intact, you know?'

‘Of course they are, Hoist. Think about it.’

About four seconds elapsed between Sunstreaker screaming and his teammates rushing into the navigation room, weapons raised, ready to confront anything from a Class 1 Guardian (which Grapple had somewhat gleefully pointed out had been loaded into the Ark’s docking bay moments before take off) to the Chronarchitect himself. Instead, they found Sunstreaker huddled in the corner, rigid with shock, standing over the disfigured remains of his 1984 counterpart.

Sunstreaker Mk II (or Mk I, depending on your temporal prejudice) was a mass of dull wires and inverted bodywork, as if he had been parboiled and dripped onto the floor. His face had collapsed into itself, having been eroded by a slow-burning acid pellet fired four million years previously.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Nightbeat, taking Sunstreaker’s hand and leading him away. ‘I shouldn’t have picked you for this mission. I shouldn’t have chosen Autobots who actually crashed with the Ark. There was always a chance that you could see yourself.’

‘I knew I was around here somewhere, I just didn’t know what I’d look like. In my version of events the Decepticons tear on board, Skywarp shoots me in the back and it all goes black. A few micros later someone drags me into the path of Auntie’s repair beams and everything’s okay again.’ He rubbed his face as if looking for trace evidence of scars. ‘I never considered the in-between.’

‘This is the room,’ declared Hoist suddenly. ‘This is where the Decepticons breached the inner hull – I helped Huffer repair the damage. And if the fight started here and spread through the control room...’ He led them between the Tubes of Transference and into the science lab. ‘There. On the floor.’

Optimus Prime and Megatron lay side-by-side, Siamese twins conjoined by a pool of shallow circuitry. Their hands were fused by a russet seam. Megatron’s big black fingers were buried deep in Prime’s palm, as if he were being comforted.

To Nightbeat, the Autobot leader seemed too real, too solid. The tightened contours of his bodywork twanged under a Möbius glow. Tongues of peeling paintwork, diamonds of dusted plexi, a hard red chest plate loosening at the hinge – every detail shuddered with immediacy, with a keen clarity of line. He had served under later versions of Optimus – the Powermaster upgrade, the Cyber-Nebulan hybrid and the post-Swarm reconstruction – but none of them had looked like, or been, the genuine article. He realised that now.

‘He’s much bigger than I remember.’ Nightbeat knew it sounded stupid, but it was true. This was not the lithe Iaconian athlete he had recreated in his personal image archives; this was a Golden Age mechanoid built with blocks and set squares – a hulking great energon-guzzling behemoth.

‘Grapple, Hoist, see if you can untangle him. We need to bring him back on line in 2012, not now – we can’t risk him seeing his crew like this.’ Nightbeat took their grumbled reply as a cue to leave and tiptoed away. He saw Prowl on the other side of the room, hunched up between console blocks, a lip-less mouth rimmed with burn marks. He wondered how the Prowl of twenty-eight years’ hence was doing and quickly snuffed the thought. He had to concentrate on the present. The past? The present. He gave up.

‘He’s loose,’ called Hoist. ‘How are we going to get him, you know, through the wormhole?’

Moments later, the Optimus Prime of 1984 was being balanced on the shoulders of four future Autobots. Their eyes were fixed on the floor as they edged across the control room, but it was obvious that the portal was nearby: the patterns of light spilling across the floor looked almost crystalline, as if someone, somewhere was willing time itself to hold still. The Celestial Temple looked detached, like a reflection of a reflection.

‘We’re doing the right thing, aren’t we Nightbeat?’

‘Sunstreaker, that is not the kind of question I need right now.’

‘Wait wait wait...!’ cried Grapple. ‘We can’t take him back without his trailer – it’s practically a part of him! By the Prime Program, can you imagine having your mind split between time zones?’

‘Relax. The Ark hasn’t redesigned him yet. Optimus and his trailer are one and the same...’ Nightbeat shifted the robot in question to a more comfortable position. ‘Enough delays. Let’s go.’

And they did, crossing three decades in a single stride.

The carnage was hypnotic.

True, the quality of the surveillance footage was poor but it still offered a glimpse of a world being reborn.

Sixshot tilted his head, engrossed, as he watched the Quintessons move across Polyhex, raking embers. Exhaust fumes rose from the landscape. Decepticons were groped and roped, rounded up by gun-grabbing Sharkticons with hoverbikes between their legs. Clean-up vehicles nuzzled wreckage while the wounded bubbled in vats filled with digestive foam as thick as nougat.

There was no soundtrack, but then there wasn't any need: Sixshot was oblivious to everything except the picture, and the milky images that grained his skin.

An injured Decepticon broke free from a chain gang by tearing off his hands, ducked a gaggle of guards and made a run for it. The picture wobbled like elastic, flicking him fifty metres forward. Another wobble, another fifty. And then a Quintesson guard with a scratchy black and white body took the Decepticon's head off with a single shot. The guards were laughing before the corpse hit the ground. The screen went blank.

'That was approximately 40 minutes ago,' said Razorclaw. 'Laserbeak chose to leave at this point, rather than risk detection.'

Sixshot turned away from the screen, the war chamber's lattice lights gliding over his tank-treads and wing-fins. He stared into the shadows, where red eyes glowed like slit wrists. 'You did well, Laserbeak. In future, however, you do not leave Leagus without permission.' He held out his forearm. Laserbeak shifted his weight, let out an electronic caw and remained in the shadows. 'Soundwave is dead, of course,' said Sixshot, lowering his arm.

'So it would seem,' said Razorclaw. 'Along with at least 1500 others. Planet-wide, our forces are down by over 60% - and that's a sympathetic estimate.'

'Where are the Autobots in all of this? Another Quintesson invasion should have drawn them out of hiding.'

Razorclaw shrugged. 'Shall I rally the troops for a retaliatory attack?'

'No. No, that would be suicidal. You've seen the footage, you know as well as I do that the Quintessons have planned their every move. They're making an exhibition of their victory, trying to goad the last few squads into battle. Believe me, Razorclaw, we would be crushed underfoot. We will not go down that path. We'll bide our time and attack when they least expect it.'

'As you wish, commander. Laserbeak, with me.'

Sixshot waited for the door to close. Even here, two miles underground, sealed inside a converted missile silo, he felt exposed. Alone again, he wondered when the rage would swell up inside him, when the fine red mist would muddy his mind. But no, he knew that this time it was different. This time he felt no anger - only fear.

From the moment he'd come on line - before the silicon-drenched robo-jelly had set on his freshly minted frame - he'd talked a good fight. He'd used arrogance and posture to mould an image of an overbearing soldier with grand ambitions. And, thanks to the unconscious designs of some feverish Jhiaxian trooper, he had the bodyshell too - after all, how often do Lifers give birth to a genuine six-changer? Once every vorn? Gifted and unique, he had decided to opt out of the Great Exodus, convinced that Trannis' plans for galactic colonisation and the voracious exploitation of fecund biomorphic vessels would lead to a Cybertronian Empire ruled by nth generation cyberclones. The basic Primal template would be Xeroxed to hell, the sparkline would start flickering, and the only worlds worth presiding over would be those populated by Protogens and Golden Agers. Far better to stay behind, mix with maniacs like Thunderwing and Macabre, and work towards leadership.

He remembered his first command post as leader of Squad 117, the legendary team of Decepticons that had existed, in various incarnations, since Megatron's first full-scale offensive against Iacon. More ruthless and specialised than the Mayhems, Squad 117 had been responsible for several Decepticon coups, including the abduction of the Neutralist spatial engineer Spanner (a hit and run job that had left forty-nine bodyguards dead). Soundwave had led 117, as had Straxus and the short-lived Scarab - it was seen as the first step towards the Decepticon Council. The squad was immortal, a semi-mythical enclave that was impervious to harm.

That all changed in 2008, during the first Quintesson invasion. Sixshot's memories of the Badlands Ambush, though scarcely called upon, were as precise and unflinching as cut glass: Tridents shredding the

sky while a white-hot blanket of sniper-fire and shrapnel pinned Squad 117 to the ground. Sharkticons springing from the terra firma wielding blasters and bayonets. The plasma mines, the scramblers, the neutron bombs...

The hail of gunfire had decimated his entire squad, spinning them into fine mist of metal and flame. Ferocet, a young Decepticon trooper, had found him cowering, half-blind, at the bottom of a crater, buried under their remains. He'd been there for minutes/hour/days – he couldn't say for sure – wondering whether to initiate self-destruct or surrender. When Ferocet told him that the invasion was over, that Magnus and his Autobots had driven the invaders away, he knew something inside him, something important, had changed.

Medics found Ferocet's remains among Tracenet, Piledriver and the rest of Squad 117.

Sixshot's reputation was intact.

The squad was no more, but their screams were always there, switching pitch at the back of his mind, jumping hoops in his audionet, needling an infinite runoff groove. He was thousands of miles away from the Badlands – he was sealed underneath titanium shielding, for God's sake – but now they were louder than ever.

The Quintessons had killed Squad 117. And there was no way that he was ever going to leave this place.

'Ground forces have been reassembled, Commander Quantax. Survival estimates were pessimistic: we have sustained only minimal losses. Skeleton teams have been dispatched to patrol the tertiary borderlines. The mobile squads await your orders.'

'Tell them to continue spreading across the Northern Territories. They can expect a few localised pockets of resistance – some stragglers may have crossed the border. Then there's the retrograde scum that pass as this planet's civilian population. Bag 'em or slag 'em, as Ghyrik used to say... I want every functional Trident re-armed and refuelled. Program all pilots with the co-ordinates of the Helio Generator Complex.'

Q-81 held up his hand. 'Commander, the sweeps operation is now complete. Three Tenderisers overheated, but that's only to be expected when you consider the cleanse radius.'

'What about leftovers?'

'We've bagged about one thousand Decepticons. The Containment Cells are full to capacity.'

'Rally the troops the moment the last Death Squad has been steam-cleaned. I want the location of the Autobots' HQ burned into every navinet. We leave for Iacon in one breem!'

Prowl moved quickly through Autobase, through its tapeworm corridors and arterial light. He heard the hum of distant machinery as Autobots continued to fortify an Archives Centre that had already been glued and glazed. Passageways had been stuffed with quickset and boarded up, sealant piped around portals, vacuum lifts depressurised and filled with grit. Chromedome had redirected the last of the energon reserves into an over-ground force field, a translucent dome the colour of peach-skin, and sub-level one, directly below ground zero, had been kitted out with glistening blocks of anti-aircraft weaponry.

So why didn't he feel safe? If anything, the fortifications made him feel uneasy. It was like hammering wood over windowpanes to block out the sun: however many planks were applied, one dust-brushed ray would always find its way in. And one ray would destroy everything.

In a way, he wished the Quintessons would attack now. At least the waiting would be over. He was tired of being on display, tired of having his every decision analysed and criticised. Guarded, they called him. Cautious. Tentative. Ten days ago he'd have taken these words as a compliment. Now they implied failure.

'Um, commander? Prowl?'

Quark jogged towards him, ducking to avoid the new passage supports. 'I was just on my way to the munitions room to collect some warp gate generators. Do you mind if we walk together?'

'Of course not – except I'm already where I want to be.' Prowl nodded at the door to Rodimus Prime's office. 'One of the perks of leadership, you see – I get an office on ground level... That was a joke, Quark.'

‘Oh! Right, right.’ The crimson courier hovered on the threshold. ‘Red Alert’s recovering well, by the way. First Aid says he should be up and about within days.’

‘Yes, I heard. Excellent news.’ Prowl groped for the door-pad. ‘Well, Quark, I’ll let you get on with your duties. Is there anything else?’

Quark massaged his neck, anticipating the twitch. ‘Prowl – I mean commander – are we, you know, doing the right thing?’

‘What do you mean, Quark?’

‘Well it’s just that Rev-Tone and I have been talking and we’re just worried that Autobase isn’t designed to repel an aerial attack and Rev-Tone says that it’s your call but technically we’re putting ourselves into a purely defensive position and strategically we’re at a disadva—’

‘I would rather not be lectured on strategy,’ Prowl snapped. ‘Especially not by Rev-Tone. If you wish to air a grievance you should go through the proper channels.’

‘Yes, sorry, of course, I was just—’

‘You have the right to lodge an official complaint with your squad commander.’

Prowl stepped inside his office, locked the door and listened to Quark’s tiny, tinny footfalls. He surveyed his office. Everything was in its proper place, everything was as it should be: hard files stacked neatly on the polished desktop, data-cards indexed and cross-referenced, personal logs and Vorcode samples (Aarox thru Zzap) freshly filed. He was glad that he still had inviolable control over one aspect of his life.

He faced the monitor screen, called ‘Messages!’ and watched First Aid melt into view.

‘Received at 0273 nano-cycles,’ announced the computer, and replayed the medic’s communiqué:

*‘Hi Prowl. You wanted to know how Rodimus Prime’s incapacity would affect his “guest”, and why he hasn’t taken this opportunity to escape the Matrix. I’m no theoscientist, but my guess is that on some subconscious level Rodimus is still holding him at bay and staving off the Turning.’*

Prowl shook his head, already tired of all the personal pronouns – how long had it been since Rodimus had banned the ‘U’ word? And just because a couple of radical theoscientists believed that the syllabic composition of Unicron’s name doubled as an ancient code; a kind of genetic password that, if pronounced correctly, would trigger a subconscious release mechanism in the Matrix Holder’s mind. The Gateway would open, transforming Rodimus into a living conduit between Matrixspace and the Real World.

Later on, Prime had confided that he simply didn’t like to hear Unicron’s name – it reminded him of the demon in his womb – but in many ways it was too late. The ban had, if anything, made the Planet Killer more powerful by adding to his dark mystique.

*‘It may be possible to remove the Matrix without invoking the Gateway, though this would mean, of course, that the next in line for the Matrix would inherit him. Rodimus once said that, er, the Chaos Bringer’s thought-forms were too deeply encoded in the Prime Program to be purged by an exorcism. He’s part of the package.’*

*‘Hope this helps. First Aid out.’*

Prowl sat down. Was he ready to be a Matrix Holder? Was he ready to inherit a malevolent techno-spirit? How often do you invite the devil into your mind?

Not for the first time, he considered destroying the Matrix. He wondered, half-heartedly, whether it was even possible: break one shell and another always sprung up from somewhere – usually the Acid Wastes – to take its place. And besides, the shell was just a shell. Sometimes things grew beyond their boundaries, and who knew what the Matrix really was?

‘Received at 0311 nano-cycles,’ intoned the computer. First Aid was back on screen.

*‘Just buzzing you to report a seizure Rodimus suffered last night. His bio-readout dipped below 440 and the life support couldn’t compensate. We had to inject nine quarts to regain stability. He’s now lost three quarters of his neural circuitry... Commander, on a purely medical level there is now less than an 8% chance of recovery. After last night we’re pumping purified energon directly into his fuel-stream and it’s a major drain on our resources.’*

Prowl folded his arms. ‘What are you saying to me, doctor?’

*‘I must therefore invoke Section 11 of the Revised Medical Charter and officially request that High Command give consideration to shutting down Rodimus Prime’s’ life support system. I’m sorry, Prowl. I await your response. First Aid out.’*

‘Incoming message at 0459 nano-cycles.’

‘Commander, this is Chromedome – if you’re there, pick up!’

‘Receiving you. What’s the progress with the modified force field?’

*'Forget it! We've just detected a fleet of ships over Lonium, and they don't conform to any Decepticon designs. I think the Quintessons are about to make a house call.'*

Prowl's body felt heavy, impacted like a dead star, and the floor flexed to support his crushing weight.

Focus. Focus!

'How many ships?'

*'Two thousand, Prowl! Two thousand!'*

Nightbeat broke the warm membrane separating Past and Present and imagined the fabric of space/time being worn that little bit thinner. He felt 2012 ripple and roll, accepting his intrusion.

Nothing much had changed, thank god... There were the upturned pews, the excavated floor, the crack across a windowpane. This was 'his' 2012, superficially at least. But perhaps... perhaps the mist was a darker shade of umber, perhaps the columns were a tad thinner than before – perhaps he would step outside and see hundreds of miniature cyberworlds filling out the sky, as if Cybertron's orbit was covered in bubble-wrap.

This was stupid. He had to relax. He felt tired – a clammy lethargy he couldn't explain. Optimus Prime's weight, perhaps? Bog-standard mental exhaustion? Or some as-yet unnamed side effect of holistic time travel?

'Get a move on!' called Sunstreaker from the other side of the wormhole. 'Prime's leg is denting my shoulder plate!'

The four Autobots placed Optimus on the altar and arranged his limbs like tableware.

'You really think we can revive him, Hoist?' asked Grapple.

'Hey, if the Ark can do it, so can I. Besides, he had a thorough maintenance check before Arklaunch.' Hoist squeezed his fingers through an opening in Prime's rib, flipped the chest plate and assessed the damage. He touched the Matrix shield; it was red-hot. 'This shouldn't take too long.'

Grapple looked up sharply. 'Can you hear that?'

Nightbeat pressed a finger against his lips. 'What?'

'A humming – and it's getting louder.' The architect walked to the nearest window.

'I hear it now,' said Nightbeat, crouching to watch Hoist at work. 'An engine?'

'Maybe.' Grapple wiped the plexiglass and saw thousands of Trident Attack Craft flying in tight formation.

'See anything?' called Nightbeat.

'He just wanted an excuse to study the temple,' said Sunstreaker, inspecting his fingertips for dirt. 'Eh, Grapple?'

Nightbeat turned around. 'Grapple?' The architect's body fell from the ceiling and snapped in two as it hit the floor.

'No one move,' said Nightbeat, reaching for his weapon.

Guardian dropped to the floor, dispersing mist. His head sloped to one side, stray support struts poking through an entry wound, and Nightbeat saw that half his scalp was missing, clawed away by a mechanoid trying to stop the pain in his brain.

*/// i am the way ///*

'Now Guardian, I thought—'

*/// the truth ///*

'—we had an understanding. This isn't going to solve—'

*/// and the light ///*

Guardian raised his hands and fired the blasters in his palms. The Autobots were lifted off their feet as the shots raked the floor. Nightbeat's finger jammed on the trigger and he sprayed laser through a plexiglass window. He landed hard and heard his ambulatory joints slip out of alignment. He was paralysed.

Hoist's body skidded across the floor like a broken toy. More gunfire, and Sunstreaker joined him. Nightbeat flopped onto his belly and started crawling for the door. He could feel the wormhole breathing down his neck.

*/// your disciples are dead /// i see you child /// i see you ///*

Ignore. Crawl. Hand over hand over hand over hand.

*/// i will cast out your demons ///*

‘Okay. You win.’ Nightbeat rolled on his back and stared at the ceiling, which was thick with dead bodies. ‘I’ve had enough of your proselytizing. If you’re going to kill me, do it now. Just no more conversation.’

Guardian cocked his head. An array of slicers and serrators sprung from his fingertips and he pushed them timidly towards Nightbeat’s face, suspicious.

‘Actually, I’ve changed my mind. Aren’t you going to read me my Last Rites?’

Guardian froze, and his head fell off his shoulders. It hit the floor with a dull thud.

And there he was, standing over the decapitated droid, holding a piece of jagged piping and looking mildly annoyed.

Nightbeat passed out.

‘All squads assume defensive positions! A to F, man the perimeter as planned! Back-up teams reinforce the supply lines. I want it tight and tidy: no distractions! Air Corps stay inside - you launch on my signal! No one breaks cover!’

Prowl took corner after corner, smashed by strobes, decibel-deafened as the klaxons came and went. He barked orders as he ran, practically chewing his wrist communicator. His words bounced back at him through the tangled Tannoy, a steady echo that matched him step for step, vowel for vowel.

‘Squads G to M assume priority positions on the artillery deck! I want you ready with blanket fire if needed! I want all rec ‘n’ research rooms shut and sealed, I want every troop route lined with hi-ex, and I want every Autobot who can hold a gun—’

*‘—to fall into fight-formation and get to their assigned area - NOW!’*

Rev-Tone started pulling wires from his engen regulators. ‘You heard him: “Every Autobot who can hold a gun.”’ Fresh pain studded a system he thought had healed, a system that had grown used to detox-shots and joint-relaxants. The ward wobbled as he touched toes with the floor.

*‘Squads N to Z fall into back-up formation and chain gang the proton packs! Scouts and surface sentries regroup—’*

Ammo frowned. ‘First Aid won’t discharge you in that condition, Rev.’

‘He’s right, you know,’ said Red Alert, hidden between medical equipment the size of monster trucks. ‘We’re no use to anyone out there.’ There was a low mumble of consent: the other patients felt more comfortable siding with a member of High Command.

*‘—designated ammo carriers! Prepare to repel the first assault in six point eight two minutes, I repeat—’*

Rev-Tone rubbed his temples and counted at least six-dozen servo-failures. ‘I can’t believe I’m hearing this! The Quintessons are invading! An extra soldier is an extra soldier!’

‘What’s going on in here? Rev-Tone! Sit down!’

Everyone watched First Aid stride down the aisle, Search and Rescue trailing behind him.

*‘—point eight two minutes! Head for your squadron leader on reaching ground level and clear bandwidth for inter-Autobot updates! Remember that—’*

First Aid nodded to the throbbing speaker. ‘Somebody switch Prowl off.’

‘But the Quintessons!’ pleaded Rev-Tone, fighting off Rescue’s attempts to hook him back up to the slab. ‘We can’t hide down here while the others are getting slaughtered!’

‘Some of us have no choice,’ said Red Alert.

‘If I thought that any of you were capable of walking from here to Autobase and then engaging in frontline combat, I would have discharged you days ago.’ First Aid turned on his toes as he spoke, making eye contact with every patient. ‘As it is, anyone who makes that walk will be dead before they reach halfway. You weren’t even fit for the troop inspection, Rev-Tone, and yet now you want to wade into battle? No. No way.’

Rescue took the punch on the chin as a signal to back off. Rev-Tone stood up with as much dignity as he could muster. ‘I hear what you’re saying, doc. But as long as I can stand up, as long as I can pull a trigger, I am going outside to fight. You can’t hold me here against my will.’

‘Lie down.’



'I've made my choice.' Rev-Tone turned awkwardly on his heels and looked at the others. 'Who's with me?' Some looked away, some motioned to their wounds apologetically. Some, like Ammo, just shook their heads. Red Alert looked him straight in the eye. So Rev-Tone padded up the aisle alone, his leg joints squeaking with each step. First Aid stepped out of his way at the last moment.

'First Aid?' It was Search, offering him a communicube with Prowl's face on it. 'Message from the boss.'

'We're expecting the initial assault any time now,' said Prowl. 'I want you to be prepared for a rush of casualties.'

'We're pretty full as it is, but I'll try. We're soaking up a lot of juice, Prowl. Perhaps if you could authorise Section 11 I could—'

'First Aid, now is not the time! Prowl out!'

Meanwhile, Rev-Tone limped down stainless steel corridors. Every few moments he would pass another ward and deliver a blunt rallying cry. Every few moments another set of patients would ignore him.

He hobbled past the operating chambers, past the surgeon's quarters, past Rodimus Prime's medi-vault (Kup was nowhere to be seen) and finally past the threshold to AMC1 itself. He looked out into the seething waste ducts, their rancid cargo veined with rust.

'If you're leaving, then leave,' said First Aid, jogging up the corridor. 'I'm locking up.'

Rev-Tone stepped outside.

Clamped between Skyhammer and Whirl, Quark wasn't sure whether he was running or being carried. Still, he thought, maybe it was better this way, swept up in the stampede, in the ferocity of it all, concentrating on keeping balance, keeping track. He wondered how many of them were running to their deaths, scrambling over barricades to reach the battle field and lunge headlong into the first whitened rush of laser. Somewhere out there – probably sandwiched between ammo-racks and bomb-drop pods – the Quintessons were slamming rounds into their handguns. Some alien biopoid was lining up the bullets that would hurtle, red-nosed and screaming, into his softly mottled techno-flesh, into the trembling slivers of ghost-grey, Matrix-blessed hardware at the back of his skull.

He surged up a stairwell, his eyes fixed on Crossblades' back, and not for the first time he wished that Rev-Tone were with him, underplaying the gravity of the situation and annoying the others in his unique fashion. Despite the rabid packs of Autobots, despite the universe of limbs, he felt utterly alone.

'Second squad over there!' yelled Prowl, with an exaggerated sweep of his arm. He was perched on a rail gun and, as always, straining to be heard above the noise. His men were trussed-up and psyched-out, as if Springer's dealer had pumped vials of frothing Syk into their fuel-streams.

The entire Iaconian army was pouring into a battle-hanger just underneath Cybertron's surface. Once the upper level of the Archives Centre, it was now fitted with rail guns the size of a Gestalt. The barrels broke the surface of the planet and hid inside fake generators, making the Helio Generator Complex look like just another bombed-out relic from Iacon's Solar Age.

Prowl reached up and tapped the ceiling. 'This is lower than it used to be,' he said to Perceptor.

'I had Quickmix and Scoop add as much shielding as they could without compromising the infrastructure. They've put another six metres of titanium between us and the Quintessons.'

'It might make all the difference,' nodded Prowl, secretly wishing the idea had been his.

'Yeah, but it's still only one layer between us and them,' said Sideswipe, scrambling onto his rail gun. 'Thank god for heavy artillery, eh?'

Prowl pressed a targeting visor under his knuckled brow. 'On my signal,' he said, as dark spots slid across his eyes.

'General Quantax, this is 1st Wave leader Q-715 giving position update: we are dead on course.' He thumbed the navigation keypad and let the Trident's targeting set burn crosshairs onto his eyeballs.

Through the cockpit window he saw the Helio Complex, bright and scattered, as if someone had emptied a bin sack.

An easy target.

'Prepare to increase speed on my signal, team. Tight formation, no high-fliers. Low sweep, nice and intimate, maximum damage. I want them to count the rivets on your afterburners before their heads explode.'

Quark stood in silence and stared at the floor, mesmerised by its tiles and tramlines and patina. Perhaps if he concentrated hard enough everything would just stop. Perhaps, if he could somehow tame the vibrancy of the moment, the forward lunge of time would be stymied. All that was left would be December 25<sup>th</sup> 2012, stretching backwards and forwards and outwards: mono-temporal, mimetic, and balanced in every direction: an eternity of tessellating copper and chrome.

They were coming.

He could hear them.

He could hear their distant engines - so subtle that at first he thought it was coming from inside him (a stalling fuel-pump or a lapsed ignition). He closed his eyes.

Prowl said, 'Fire!' and the rail guns raked laser across the sky. Tridents fell like sequins, twirling and luminous, but the majority ploughed onwards and dumped their cargo. A stream of cluster bombs battered the Archives Centre until thousands of solar panels were bubbling in the heat.

The battle-hangar vibrated like drum skin. The ceiling had already started to crack.

'We've played our trump card,' said Sideswipe. 'Now they know exactly where we're hiding!'

The Tridents regrouped for the second sweep, this time targeting the rail guns that poked through the wreckage like chimney stacks. Another exchange (proton beams versus cold plasma), and a chimney toppled.

'Keep firing! Forget about power reserves, I want a constant barrage of aggressive fire! They don't get close! Crossblades, get over here!' Prowl surrendered his seat and slapped the Pretender on the back. 'They're using a V formation - aim for the hinge.'

The explosions outside had lost their muffle and delay, becoming crumpled slabs of sound. The Archives Centre was subsiding into the ground, pushed deeper by every batch of cluster-bombs.

'First squads prepare to move,' said Prowl via inter-Autobot radio, and watched Powerflash lead a wedge of front-liners towards the exit. 'You'll appear three miles west of the generator. Once you're outside, remember that your primary role is defence. No cat and mouse games, no space-chasing, no-'

The world went white. Something formless and unspeakable rushed through the battle-hangar, searing every surface - a new brand of super-flame, perhaps, streamlined and upgraded. The world went red, then black, and then the smoke began to writhe and loosen.

Outside, the Quintessons thought they had won. After all, the Helio Generator Complex was levelled and red-ringed, like cooling halogen.

Prowl peeled himself off the floor, leaving a black mark. 'What - the hell - was that?'

'One of the rail guns exploded,' croaked Perceptor, using one arm to forage for the other. 'I estimate we have three minutes before the ceiling collapses. I suggest we vacate the area before...' A laserbolt speared the ceiling, thinned to needlepoint between his feet, and dissolved. He looked up at the night sky; the stars were eclipsed by Tridents.

'Of course, I could be wrong.'

'Dear god,' said Prowl. 'They're in.'

And yet there was just... there was just *something about him*.

Nightbeat beheld Optimus Prime with a combination of awe and anxiety. The resurrected Autobot leader was kneeling over Hoist's knotted body, his hands - each one large enough to crush Nightbeat's head, chestnut-like, in its palm - patiently working the frayed wires, threading them like bootlaces. His shoulders were almost too far apart, bending wide of a disproportionately small head. Sinews of metal surged straight for the skull, ducking under a bullet-bruised helmet. And the ease with which he was

performing the operation! As if administering complex field surgery – with his fingers! – was the most natural thing in the world! Nightbeat knew Prime had been a medic, but until now he'd seen only Ratchet treat wounds with such dexterity.

Having helped carry Grapple and Sunstreaker's ragtag bodies to the altar, Nightbeat now felt redundant. He sat on a pew, marvelling at how quickly Prime had patched up his ambulatory system. It was only now that he started to count Prime's injuries – the delicate circuitry, meshed like twine, glistening in the dark.

'I'm sorry this is taking so long,' said Optimus suddenly, 'but Hoist took quite a blast.' He slid his hands under the engineer's head and turned it sideways, searching for the glimmer in each optic. 'Don't worry, though – he'll be fine.'

Nightbeat went to speak and then changed his mind. This was happening quite a lot. Whenever he thought of something to say he held it in check until it seemed inconsequential, and decided not to say it at all.

Why did he feel so humble? It irritated him, for one thing. He'd talked to Optimus Prime before. He'd chatted to him – been flippant, sarcastic, light hearted. Their conversations had taken in everything from pre-Quest Creation Matrix theology to the providence of the semi-organic tissue found inside the Primal Chamber; the mythical Outpost Infinity to the fate of the prototype Arks; the origin of certain Transformers' 'superpowers' to the Empire's Amnesty Vs Atrocity debate... yeah, a right barrel of laughs.

But then he wasn't really the same Nightbeat as he was back then, and, in a different way, the broad-shouldered robot kneeling beside Hoist wasn't the same Optimus Prime. *His* Optimus, the Optimus he had served under from 1989, had been a replica: Version 2.0, a Nebulan upgrade imbued with an approximation of the original's personality; a remake that had, in turn, been tweaked and modified until permanent shutdown in late 2005. The real Optimus had died in 1987, in a dingy human warehouse. This hulking red-blue Autobot, this trans-temporal saviour tending to his teammates with the speed and sensitivity of an adrenaline-soaked Fixit – this was the real deal. This was the original.

And Nightbeat hadn't seen him in four million years.

'Could you give me a hand here?'

Nightbeat could tell that this was not the first time he'd been asked, and felt vaguely embarrassed. He helped Prime set Hoist upright and watched the engineer's optics pop and blink like dying headlamps.

'Give him a few moments to adjust,' advised Optimus, and started work on Grapple.

Nightbeat framed the wormhole with his thumb and forefinger. He could see 1984. Even weirder, he could see his own reflection in the Ark's glossy parquet: a pattern of light displaced by thirty years. He could see... For god's sake, why was Prime taking this so calmly?! One moment he was colliding with an alien planet, the next he was staring at the ceiling of a Cybertronian temple while an evangelical Guardian droid ripped casing from bickering Autobots. Why wasn't he panicking? Why wasn't he demanding to know what the hell was going on?

Deep down, beneath the awe, beneath the anxiety, Nightbeat knew what was bothering him: he needed to unburden himself. He needed to throw the whole convoluted mess into Prime's philanthropic face, sit back and watch his reaction. For too long he and he alone had shouldered the consequences of this mission, knotting his brain over the twists and loops of chrono-manipulation; the parallax-patterns, the circular timelines and Alternaties – a temporal surgeon playing touch-up with Time. Prime had to say he understood, or, failing that, that Nightbeat had made The Only Choice. He had to hug him, or chastise him, or *scream* at him, or backhand him up the aisle, fire in his eyes, yelling about the Sanctity of Causality – anything!

'Grapple's turn to stand,' called the robot in question, and this time Nightbeat was ready. He smiled despite himself. It was good to hear Optimus' voice again (sonorous, varnished, almost comically grave). Grapple was placed alongside Hoist, and as Optimus conducted a fleeting damage assessment he said, 'How did I get here?'

Nightbeat felt as if a rigid steel brace had been whipped from his frame; every limb was joyously loose. 'I've been waiting for you to ask,' he said, and gestured for Prime to pull up a pew. 'It's difficult to really know when to begin.' And yes, this was surprising to him, because he'd been rehearsing his speech since shutting the door on Prowl and Perceptor. Where was the eloquence now? All that tech-talk about 'temporal poaching' and 'causal insulation', the rubric about 'divergent timelines' and 'mind-purging'. It

suddenly sounded... stupid. No, not stupid: cold. This wasn't about Perceptor's latest theory, this was about one person. The person sitting on a pew, arms folded politely in his lap, waiting for an explanation.

Okay, he thought, here goes. 'You and a select crew of Autobots travelled into space to clear a path through an asteroid belt. Once you completed your mission, you were attacked...'

'By the Decepticons. Yes. Megatron ambushed us. We were forced back through the command chamber, and then I...' Optimus remembered his own finger hovering over a single button, a counter-magnetic safety field challenging the tip; he remembered measuring the fate of an entire race not in eras or cycles or six tidy epochs, but in millimetres: the distance between his finger and the quadthruster key. 'I set the Ark on a collision course with the nearest uninhabited planet.'

'That's right. The force of the crash shut you down. All of you. The Sidestep Drive kicked in, hiding the Ark, and...' Nightbeat's voice petered out. He had reached an impasse. On the one hand, there was the Past: Mount St Hilary, human contact, the fuel raids, Prime's adventures on Earth during the '80s. On the other hand, thirty years in the future, post-Empire, post-Unicron, post-*everything*, there was his home planet, burnt to the bone and swarming with Quintessons. How to bridge that gap?

'Optimus... you were offline for a very long time.'

'I see.' Prime nodded, and for a moment Nightbeat thought that the inevitable question would not be asked. 'How long?'

'Four million years.'

'I'm sorry?'

'This is the year 2012. You're in the future. We pulled you forward in Time.'

'You rescued me. You found me on that planet and brought me back home.'

'Yeah, but... it's not quite that simple.'

'What about the others?' Prime was suddenly animated. 'What about Prowl and Ratchet and Wheeljack – did you retrieve them too?'

'You're jumping ahead. Prowl and the others are fine, but they're still on board the Ark. Their time will come.'

'I don't understand.'

'After four million years, the Ark's computer is brought back online by a freak natural occurrence. The Autobots and the Decepticons are repaired to blend in with the landscape of the alien planet. You're stranded there, on Earth, for a number of years before returning to Cybertron in 1991.'

It was a simplified version of what really happened, but it would do.

'And here I am now. Right.'

'Well, sort of... I'm sorry Optimus, I'm not explaining this very well.' Nightbeat looked at the wormhole and took Prime's arm with an assurance he wouldn't have thought possible ten minutes ago. 'This is a holistic wormhole,' he explained, leading him to the altar. 'And that is the Ark, 1984, still embedded in the Earth, still containing the bodies of your crew. We didn't save you, Optimus – we stole you. The wormhole is a time machine. We travelled into the past, to a time before Auntie repaired you, and brought you to 2012.' He spread his hands at the madness of it all, as if absolving himself of responsibility. 'This is the future.'

Prime turned his back on the wormhole, rubbed his optic lids, and leaned on the lectern, practically wrapping his arms around the stem. He made an odd, muffled sound that, for a moment, Nightbeat thought was laughter.

'This is quite a lot to absorb, Nightbeat. I mean, why? Why use your machine to abduct me? Why go to all the trouble of searching and...' His voice was lost behind his hands. 'Too many questions.'

Nightbeat went to speak – he wanted to blurt an explanation before he'd even formulated one in his head – but his companion was already motioning him to stop.

'I would like a moment alone,' Optimus said firmly. 'I need time to gather my thoughts.'

'By Iacon's Great Dome! Optimus!'

Hoist steamed towards Prime and pumped his hand. 'Haven't changed a bit, have you? Not a bit. It's been a while! Good to have you back, commander.'

'Stick to Optimus, old friend. I'm not used to the formalities.' He waited to be released from Hoist's grip, amused by this new method of greeting, and said, 'It's good to see you again too.'

Nightbeat snuffed a spark of annoyance at being relegated. And as for Hoist! *It's been a while!* Thank goodness he'd had a chance to brief Prime on the basics before the engineer had come back online. He

acknowledged that somewhere, buried under the mission specifics, under the responsibilities and obligations, he felt a hint of jealousy. Things had changed in four million years. He had changed. He wasn't an inexperienced police investigator from Kalis anymore, the grin-and-bear-it go-getter waving his hand for a place on the Ark, getting ideas above his station. Nowadays, he was more than equal to Hoist – and Bluestreak, for that matter.

Meanwhile, behind a floored Sunstreaker, Grapple was reasserting himself in a different way, flexing his arms as new energy flooded his body. Within seconds he was at Prime's side, finding his fingers and making eye contact. Amidst the chatter and the handshakes, Optimus glanced at Nightbeat. 'There's time for welcoming later. Our immediate priority is Sunstreaker.'

Nightbeat smiled to himself. Prime had somehow commanded this unit from the moment he was carried through the wormhole, but this was the first time he'd spoken like a commander. As they gathered around Sunstreaker he found himself kneeling beside Optimus, who – as if it was the most natural and innocent thing in the world – leant towards him and said, 'We'll continue our discussion later.'

Prowl's Autobots looked at the sky over their heads.

Those with aerial modes jumped up and transformed, reaching the battle as space-skimmers, triads, propax-jets and gunner-planes in a flurry of high-speed, high-gloss animation. The sky became overloaded. Crossfire connected every moving object, as if a cat's cradle had been stretched over the heavens, as if all of Cybertron was wrapped in a ball of fizzing neon string.

Rooted to the floor with a concussion blaster fused to his palm, Prowl was one of five hundred Autobots covered in leftover wreckage (ceiling struts and grid-tiles, white as alabaster). They were standing near the centre of a huge crater, a wasteland the shape of an unglazed bowl. The Quintessons hadn't just obliterated the Helio generators or pounded the rail guns to dust; they'd ground their heel into the surface of Cybertron and twisted the boot.

Skirting the mesosphere, above the highest curve of aerial battle, Q-715 surveyed the open ground and pictured packs of addled Cybes wandering from their bunker and falling to their knees. 'We've broken their defences,' he barked into his mouthpiece. 'They're out in the open. Bring in the ground troops.'

Nearby, the troop carriers crossed the Cadmium Mountains, as graceless as hump-backed whales. Inside, Sharkticon cannon fodder waited for the floor to give way.

Rev-Tone found Kup spading grit from a blocked passageway on sub-level 2 of the Archives Centre. They could hear the battle raging above ground.

'There'll be nothing left of them by the time we get up there,' mumbled Kup. The ceiling hatch won't open; something's weighing it down.'

Rev-Tone sank six plasma bolts into the hatch, wrenched the handle and released a four-sided torrent of body parts. He and Kup climbed through the hole, their eyes pinned on a slash of laser-riddled sky.

'Welcome to the frontline,' said Crossblades, waving them over. 'We need all the help we can get!'

Kup saw a cluster of high rankers in the distance, fused together like a triangle. He ran towards them, tearing a semi-slugged firearm from a headless Quickswitch.

Rev-Tone stumbled across the battlefield, searching for just one face. Sharkticons and Autobots wheeled and twisted on all sides, little more than fuzzed knots of motion. He was oblivious to the nose-diving Tridents, lubrous and attenuated, wrapped in ribbons of turquoise flame. Instead, he stepped through cadavers and all manner of limbless horrors, scrutinising body-paint and profile, matching names to shapes, moving on to the next dead soldier before the circuitry had peeled from his heel.

'I'm too late. He's dead. He's dead. He's dead.' The words were worn out through repetition; they lurked in his voxbox and refused to be flushed. He scanned the crowds and identified Autobots not by their names but by the simple fact that they weren't *him*. They weren't—

'Quark!' The word bolted, unchecked, from his lips. There he was, surrounded by Sharkticons, a crimson rock in a sea of grey. Rev-Tone surged forward and shot down the enemy.

'Why aren't you in the medical centre?' demanded Quark

'You expect me to sit back while you get yourself killed? We're a team, remember?'

Quark watched his friend take pot shots at low-flying Tridents and realised that the twitch in his neck had disappeared.

Three tetrahedral aircraft raced over a blur of matchstick towns and gate-crashed the Manganese quadrant, once home to the planet's biggest spaceport, Transgalactica, an interstellar hotspot for traders and pilgrims, tourists and fugitives. Like so much of Cybertron, it had long been reduced to a swirl of fire-blitzed buildings.

Jolup heard his hoarse, wind-lashed voice and wondered how long he had been screaming. It was a sound borne of pure exhilaration; action stripped of all consequence. He felt the polar wind chill his nerve circuitry and savoured every body-jarring rush of propulsion. The horizon swung itself upside-down as he threw himself into another barrel roll; a flick of retro-thrust flame etched his flight path retrospectively.

He would not be tethered, caged, roped, controlled. Up here, in his newly-inherited airborne mode, he was free. He gasped in joy. Truly, this was what it felt like to be alive. 'This is incredible!' he yelled.

Sevax and Ryknia yelped in agreement and tried to match his pace. This was the first real chance they'd had to test their adopted bodies. The parched Cybertronian air was a perfect foil, lubricating their sleek changeforms.

'Let's not forget why we're here,' said Ryknia, gunning for the nearest mountain. 'We've been gone hours.'

Sevax nudged into the lead. 'Cybertron's a big place. We wouldn't want to disappoint Quantax by conducting a slapdash search, would we? But you're right: we're letting our new forms get the better of us.'

'I have a suggestion,' said Jolup. 'Let's ditch Quantax and take control.'

'Ha! I hope you're joking. Quantax has the weight of Xenon behind him, and therefore the weight of an entire army. I don't think the rest of the Quintessons would rally to our defence.'

'That's because they don't trust us. They think we're half-Decepticon.'

Sevax accelerated towards the Manganese Mountains. 'All the more reason not to murder Quantax. Look, why don't we just follow orders, find a suitable location for the second phase, and put all thoughts of insurrection behind us.'

Along with the Vosian crater (big and ugly enough to survive without its geographical tag; it was now simply 'the Crater'), the Manganese Mountain range was one of the only Cybertronian landmarks visible from space. A deep scar running down the planet's cheek, it connected Mytharc to Mismia and was vulnerable only to perspective: from its northernmost peak, the lightly chromed summits became little more than homogeneous, butterscotch pleats.

The largest mountain looked different from all the others. The summit itself, a teetering pillar of metal, was at right angles with a smooth plateau over ten miles wide.

Ryknia transformed and landed en Pointe. Sevax and Jolup plumped for a regular runway slowdown, braving the crisp tunnels of high-altitude wind.

Sevax looked at the metallic summit and the featureless stretch of tungsten on which it stood. 'It's like we're standing on someone's grave,' he decided.

'Yes, a striking metaphor,' said Jolup. 'You must use it in your next opus.'

'It's a simile, actually. And yes, I probably will.'

'According to Quantax's topographical scan,' said Ryknia, 'this is Mount Edeus, part of the Manganese belt. It's remote, it's deserted, it's easily defensible – it's perfect.'

'But there's no way we can get inside!' said Sevax.

'Ah, but there is!' Ryknia pointed to the vertical outcrop. 'There's a doorway built into that cliff-face.'

They walked over.

'It's ancient,' said Sevax, jabbing the acne'd hinge. 'I doubt anyone's been inside for centuries.'

Ryknia drew a circle with his arm-mounted pulse rifle, extracted a plug of metal and climbed inside. An array of lights blinked and parried as he crossed the coffinous chamber, empty except for a door at the opposite end. He beckoned to the others and took the lead. Their footfalls were burnt onto vidcam reels by auto-surveillance cameras that hung from the ceiling, their lenses fogged and frowning.

The other door slid open obligingly. The Quintecons stepped through, brushing the underfloor sensornet. A thousand lights exploded into life and the core of the complex was revealed: thousands of

prison cells, empty and dusted with rust, spiralled around a column of space. Down below, the sensonet was still spreading its message: level after level was being lit up, one at a time, each one adding depth to the pit.

Ryknia looked up and saw more cells – a mirror image of the downward view. Perhaps Up and Down eventually met, and linked, and swapped direction, creating an infinite wheel of cells.

‘They’ve hollowed out the mountain!’ he laughed, more amazed than amused. ‘I was right – this place *is* perfect. We’ve found ground zero; we’ve found the nub of the second phase. Sevox, Jolup – I give you Cybertron’s first Autobot/Decepticon concentration camp!’

‘Make sure it’s secure. We don’t want some Neut nomad breaking in and muddying the time-stream.’

Grapple smudged a warm gland of sealant across the temple entrance, cementing the reattached doors. ‘Absolutely, Nightbeat. A pacifist running amok through time – imagine the consequences! He might, I dunno, restore peace or something.’

‘Are you being ironic, Grapple? I didn’t know you had it in you.’

Nightbeat looked around for Optimus Prime, something he was doing about every three seconds. It was hard not to, for so many reasons. Prime was standing alone, back-turned, hands holstered to his hips, staring at the Acid Wastes. The dawn sky was raked with the echo of Trident quadthrusters – streams of pink cloud, fluffed and faded, like twists of damp linen. The land was restless, too – at this time of day, when the night was trapped and fading fast, the trammelled Wastes began to steam, as if the bloodied thread that bound the ground had been unstitched, its scar-lines plucked out loop by loop, allowing the ancient wounds to breathe. Great spumes of giddy energy bubbled up to mix with exotic pollutants: tropical acids, designer chemicals, bacterial chains sizzling in the mud – futuristic hybrids of fug and fume.

Nightbeat wandered closer.

‘It hasn’t changed,’ said Optimus without turning around.

‘Excuse me?’

‘Cybertron. The Acid Wastes, at any rate. We’re in Lonium – I can see the remains of the habitation blocks over there.’

‘I don’t think many people have been here since you left,’ said Nightbeat, trying to guide him gently away from the subject. He was quietly grateful that Prime hadn’t been reactivated in Tarn or Vos or – god help him – Iacon, city-states that were little more than graveyards full of sirens and crushed cars. Primus’ last gift to Cybertron in 1991 – global rejuvenation – had amounted to a quick dab with a silver brush. The bombsites and rust-rimmed craters had been sprinkled with glitter, the nuke-prints spruced with sequins, the cityscapes wrapped in tinfoil and brocade. The face-lift was skin deep, as they always were, but at least it stopped the ageing process, as least it hid the past. But Primus, as always, had underestimated his children: within twenty years the planet was blacker and bleaker than ever before, a mass of ragged flaps and folds. First time round it had taken four million years to despoil; second time round it took twenty. Who said they hadn’t progressed?

‘The war isn’t over,’ Optimus said, turning to Nightbeat.

‘How can you tell?’

‘It’s obvious. It’s written all over your face.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Four million years and we’re still fighting.’

‘The Decepticons have been... I mean, both sides were...’ Nightbeat gave up. How could you justify four million years of war?

‘Is that why you’ve brought me back? To fight?’

Nightbeat saw the look on Prime’s face and a cold electrical charge ran through his circuitry. ‘It’s not quite as simple as that,’ he said, realising that it *was* that simple, that Prime had once again had hit the nail squarely on the head. ‘This goes beyond our war – beyond our stupid war.’ He barely recognised his own voice: it was pained, almost pleading. For his sake (not Prowl’s, not the Autobots’, not Cybertron’s), Prime had to understand. ‘We’ve been invaded by a race of bio-mechanicals called the Quintessons. They’ve attacked Polyhex and, by now, almost certainly laid siege to Autobase. The situation is hopeless. We need someone who can take control, someone who can galvanise our forces and confront the Quintessons head

on. That's why we brought you here.' He looked over the simmering Wastes. 'That's why I was ordered to bring you here.'

'The temple's sealed tight!' Hoist bounded over, retracting his acetylene torch. 'Sunstreaker's checked the perimeter – there are no other entrances. What next?'

Nightbeat looked at his feet.

'We head for Iacon,' said Optimus. 'That is where these Quintessons will be, I take it?'

'Er, yes.'

Optimus transformed into a bulky Cybertronian truck, the enormous Autobot symbol on the front of his trailer resembling a heraldic shield. He watched the others switch to their vehicle modes. 'What's happened to you all? Have you been upgraded?'

Nightbeat revved his engine. 'It's a long story...'

*A minor setback.*

Three words. Three words delivered with a directness that pinned him to the spot. Three words that served as a sweet prelude to the diatribe that followed. General Quantax – strategist, politician, patriot – felt about five minutes old, like a plump little Neoseed, as if he'd been freshly rolled from Unicron's doughy surface. He stood with his fingers knitted behind his back, head slightly bowed, afraid to look away. He was an ant trapped in a scorching beam of sunlight and the monitor screen was the magnifying lens.

On screen, Xenon was ranting evangelically, using his tentacles to enunciate. 'Thunderclash does not hold the Matrix, it's as simple as that. And yes, of course we had no way of *knowing*...' He italicised the last word with a fluid diagonal slash. 'But that is no excuse! A barren Autobot leader! It would be amusing if it didn't jeopardise our entire campaign! Without the geode, the colonisation plans will collapse.' He moved close to camera, and for a moment Quantax imagined a haze of tendrilled techno-flesh bursting through the glass. 'Do you appreciate what I'm saying?'

'I understand our situation,' Quantax muttered, mentally adding 'but I fail to see why *I* am being disciplined.'

'Of course,' rejoined Xenon, with the breathless candour of someone importing a great secret, 'all is not lost. The Matrix must be entombed in the Autobots' other leader, Rodimus Prime. And if I am to believe your field reports, Rodimus should have already fallen at the hands your Iaconian strike force.'

'Well yes, but there is still some way to—'

'I cannot emphasise the importance of the Matrix enough, General. We are impotent without it. Find Rodimus, even if it means foraging through acres of dead Autobots, even if it means venturing onto the battlefield and plunging your hand through every blackened chest. Xenon out!'

*Find the Matrix.*

Hah! If only it were that simple, thought Quantax. Far away from his shiny new base the Autobots were still holding his forces at bay, and while he was confident of victory, he could picture Rodimus Prime's bullet-ridden corpse disappearing under a mountain of wreckage, the Matrix bobbing in streams of gushing rust.

His wrist throbbed with an incoming message: 'Sir, this is Q-311, reporting as requested. The squad has reached the suburbs of the neighbouring city-state. We've pulled in a few stragglers, a few down and outs and a couple of deserters. Do you want us to carry on looking?'

'This world is infested with mutos, looters and offloaders. You're looking for pockets of real resistance, soldier, not *disjecta membra*. Don't waste my time with trawls through the underworld. Expand your search. Head for the polar quadrants. Quantax out.'

He scraped his hand down his forehead, his fingertips loitering around his eyes. Xenon's sub-space alarm call had made him forget the magnitude of his primary mission. While he fretted about some blue-eyed Autobot Matrix Holder, the main body of Decepticon prisoners was building up underneath him and clean-up squads were widening their net. For the first time, he wondered whether things were slipping out of his control.

'General! Another message – main screen.'

'Blast! Can't anyone do their job without – ah! Sevax. Where are you?'

*'The other side of the planet, General: a disused penal facility inside a hollowed mountain. We thought we'd call it Kledji in honour of the last Majestrix. It's ideal. We even have sub-space communication equipment.'*



‘Are the containment facilities in order?’

*‘You could store twice the population of Cybertron in here. Jolup and Ryknia are still exploring. The place will need a certain element of customisation, however, before we’re ready to start the injections.’*

‘I will despatch engineering teams immediately. Contact Aquaria and order the first cache of Inhibitor Chips.’

As the picture faded, Quantax caught himself smiling. It surprised him.

Phase two was underway. The frontier teams were slowly cleansing every square mile of the planet, the Autobot Resistance was being slaughtered and Cybertron’s first concentration camp was about to be filled. And as for this Matrix business...

A minor setback.

Fading embers rode air currents like cherry blossom, pink petals lulled from half-slugged robots. It was daybreak, and although the Autobots and Quintessons were still fighting, their battle had become somewhat bathetic. They were going through the motions, and while many people were still dying, it felt as if an obligation was being fulfilled, as if it was just a case of each side pounding on and on and *on* until someone gave up.

Prowl crouched and fired, pasting a twisting skin of Sharkticon body parts over a green-tinged fireball. No good, though – another three rushed to take his place. He stared at his own threadbare army and decided it was no good: the situation was officially hopeless.

Sideswipe sprinted towards him, taking a shortcut between two rows of Sharkticons. Wrists crossed, he emptied his photon clips into their chests, and was glistening with oil by the time he reached his commander.

‘I think there’s a way out of this, Prowl. We split the force – I’ll lead a covering squad up here while you take the others below ground.’

‘Forget it. We’re not running.’

‘If we stay up here we will *die*. If we split up, half of us will survive, even if it’s just for another day. Give me enough perimeter troops and I’ll give you enough time to get clear. Come on, Prowl – you’re only arguing because it’s me standing here, not some member of High Command. In five seconds you’ll have Perceptor recommending exactly the same strategy.’

‘But—’

‘Then it’s agreed.’ Sideswipe sent an inter-Autobot radio communication to the Autobots on the outskirts of the battlefield. *‘If you are receiving this communication then stay your ground. We are splitting the force and you have been chosen to provide covering support.’* He nodded to Prowl. ‘Your turn.’

Rev-Tone felt only the slightest crease of pain as the Sharkticon’s fist broke his visor. His world was fragmented, halved and halved again, and when he fell to the ground steam jetted from his legs. A familiar voice invaded his head as his aggressor levelled a blaster, leaned forward and exploded.

Quark walked through the smoke. ‘We’re even!’ He yanked him upright. ‘Did you get the internal message? Good – let’s go!’

Rev-Tone started running and stopped when he realised that Quark wasn’t following – in fact, they were heading in opposite directions.

‘The drop-down hatch is this way, Quark! Come on!’

‘But Sideswipe’s orders—’

‘Sideswipe? I’ve just had Prowl on the line telling us to head underground!’ Behind him, Autobots were sprinting towards the bottom of the crater; those behind Quark were running for the perimeter. The two robots suddenly found themselves stranded in a widening no-man’s land.

‘I’ve been chosen to stay behind.’ Quark almost sounded apologetic. ‘Sideswipe’s team.’

They stared at each other, waiting for the nod, for the flicker of acceptance. A Trident thudded into a nearby patch of ground. They stood on the fringe of the explosion, oblivious.

Rev-Tone smiled behind the remains of his mouth grille.

‘What’s so funny?’

Rev-Tone grabbed Quark's arm and broke into the best run his damaged legs would allow. 'You're coming with me, Quark. You think Sideswipe wants someone like *you* on the front line?'

Galvatron let the numbness spread. He was strung up and shared between four puckered sockets: one for each hand, each foot. He was pretty sure that this wasn't a regular body-harness – he could feel warm-lipped suction cups drinking energy in urgent gulps while his body, splayed like the Star of David, was pulled towards an impossible tautness. His head rolled back and his optic bulbs lolled in their craters.

His particle cannon, broken on arrival, lay in the corner of the torture chamber and glimmered like barley sugar.

A door hissed open (everything on Aquaria hissed, even the light bulbs, even the cell bars, even the footfalls on wet walkways; the whole base was sponged and rubberised, seething with trapped air) and Haxian stepped inside, a scanner in his hand.

Galvatron did his best to scream obscenities, but his voice was slurred and wordless.

He did not know why he had been moved from his tawdry backwater cell to this executive torture suite, with its subdued mood lighting and tastefully dark surfaces, its granular sheen and fibreglass finish. (He wondered, fleetingly, why torture chambers were always painted black, why people strove to muddy the mix of gore and grout. What's the point in slapping lassoes of lubricant against muddy surfaces? Why not highlight the contrast? Forget mood-hues and tonal textures, forget wipe-clean surfaces: imagine the look on an Autobot's face when he stumbles into a cream-coated Deathpit and sees the tapestry of dross and discharge woven across a buttermilk surface.)

Galvatron tried to focus, something he was never very good at. He was having trouble concentrating, in fact he could barely remember how he'd got here. He did recall some Quintesson guards returning Thunderclash's body to the cell. The Autobot had looked like a cardboard cut out, crimped with mildew and folded in all the wrong places. An embarrassing way to die, he had thought, before Sharkticons had strapped him to a metal tray and brought him here.

Xenon's voice filtered through a speaker in the wall. *'Finish the body check, Haxian. Just scan him: this isn't an autopsy.'*

Haxian looked at the viewing gallery (a ribbon of bulletproof plexi that ran underneath the ceiling), holstered his scanner and headed upstairs. Soon, he was standing alongside his commander and watching two Sharkticons wheel a platform into the chamber below.

'You're looking at a very complex robot,' he said, addressing Xenon's reflection. 'I mean, the physiological complexity alone is enough to—'

'Haxian, there are times when I value your diligence, your slavish attention to detail. This is not one of those times. Feed your data into the system and leave me alone. I want to see this.'

Down below, a nervous guard slipped a halo of energy around Galvatron's neck while Ferrax climbed the scaffold. The surgeon made an incision from scalp to shoulder blade, loaded an injector gun and fired an Inhibitor Chip into folds of cerebral tissue.

Galvatron experienced an odd new sensation; damp and heaving and ice-hot, it rippled through his morphcore, scorching every circuit. The backs of his eyes throbbed and crackled, braving the open-lipped kiss of a billion electrodes. The foreign object between his throat and his brain threw its web wide, touching every corner of his body. What little strength he had slipped away, unnoticed.

'You see, Haxian? The Inhibitor Chip finds a home in any Cybertronian, Autobot or Decepticon.' Xenon picked up a test tube filled with colourless liquid. 'And now for the best part.'

'I'm reversing the energy drain, commander. He should be returning to full operational strength as we speak.'

Galvatron hungrily accepted each sumptuous surge of energy, allowing each honeyed ripple of power to pollinate his CPU. As the sweet waves of nausea broke inside his skull and Xenon walked through the door, he wondered why they were reviving him.

'Well?' said the Majestrix. 'How does it feel to share body-space with a new host? How does it feel when your limbs give in to the whim of something so small, so innocent?'

'...king about.'

'What?'

'I said I don't know what you're talking about.'

'No, of course you don't. How could you? You've been implanted with an Inhibitor Chip, Galvatron – a device that renders all transformation circuitry inert. You're trapped in mono-form.'

'At least until I break free, kill you and remove it.'

'Oh, it cannot be removed. Disturb the roots and you die instantly: a photon pulse would fry your brain module.'

'You're lying.'

'About the trip-switch?'

'About everything. It's very easy for you to stand there and tell me I can't transform when I can't even move.'

'I didn't think you'd believe me. Science is built on empiricism, not blind theory.' Xenon held up the test tube. 'This is *aqua fortis* – the liquid that covers all of Aquaria. Now – watch this.' Xenon held the test tube over Galvatron's thigh and watched him struggle to escape its shadow. 'Be still, be still,' he purred, like a nurse about to clean a wound. He tipped the bottle. A droplet fled the meniscus and fell onto Galvatron's leg.

The liquid burrowed through his armour plating, through his epidermal circuitry, through his very endoskeleton, slicing through the layers with the ease and urgency of acid through blotting paper. He screamed, of course; he screamed and thrashed as best he could, lost in bottle-green fumes. When the pain finally ended he stared at a new hole in his leg, at a sizzling, black-rimmed tunnel with identical entry and exit points. The droplet nuzzled the floor, globed and perfect.

'Oh dear,' said Xenon. 'Don't like getting wet, do we?' And then, in one fluid motion, he poured the rest of the liquid over his own head. A second skin shaped his facemask, wet and fluent. It slipped over his cheekbones, veined his chin and trickled to the floor. He laughed at Galvatron's mortified expression. 'We Quintessons are impervious, of course.'

'So you brought me all this way just to gloat, did you? To play your little games. You Quintessons always did have an inflated sense of self-worth. Inhibitor Chips and this miraculous acid water. Do I look impressed? Because I'm not.'

'Ah, but you miss the connection.' The ceiling split apart to reveal a slab of plexiglass and thousands of gallons of *aqua fortis*. 'The moment I leave this room, Galvatron, your bonds will loosen. You will have one minute to escape before this chamber is flooded. If you transform, I will not release the liquid.'

Haxian was waiting for him in the viewing gallery, back to the glass. 'Ready, commander?'

Xenon placed a single tentacle against the release pad and moved to the window. The axis-rack retracted into the wall, forcing Galvatron onto the floor. The Decepticon jumped to his feet with demon speed.

'40 seconds,' said Xenon.

Galvatron lunged for the doorway and drove his fists into the hooks and hinges. He left a constellation of dents but nothing more.

'30 seconds.'

Haxian had no taste for this. The experiment was grandiose and overblown; he'd always thought Xenon above such self-indulgence. He concentrated on his monitor screen, waiting for the bodyscan results, and tried to ignore his leader's countdown.

'20 seconds.'

Galvatron dug his fingers into the wall and climbed towards the viewing gallery. Xenon held his ground as the Decepticon appeared at the window. After all, a single increase in pressure and the robot would be dead, stripped to a paper-thin skeleton.

'15 seconds.'

Galvatron punched the glass until his finger mechanisms split, until his knuckles were clipped, then flattened, then concave. He was screaming, he was nudging his voxbox towards shutdown, and Xenon could not hear a thing.

'10 seconds.'

Cracks appeared in the glass. Xenon jabbed another button, the walls became charged with electricity, and Galvatron was thrown to the floor.

'5 seconds.'

*Processing... 81%... 87%... Haxian was lost in a world of figures, of stat-curves and split projections: an ordered, clinical world a thousand miles away from torture, neuro-chipping and colonisation. 90%... 94%*

*'3... 2 ...1.'*

Galvatron stopped and stood and stared.

Xenon pressed the release pad.

As the sun rose over Iacon, 270 Autobots were running for their lives. They fell into pairs and packs and headed for the drop-down hatch, which was little more than a mineshaft hacked into the crater floor. Prowl guarded the entrance and moulded early arrivals into a tight defensive circle while Perceptor and Kup lowered off-liners and brain-deads onto a blanket of outstretched arms. Worst of all were the burns victims, the Autobots who had been semi-slugged by belching Tridents: their bodywork was still wet and bubbling, their gelatinous faces alive with tides and geysers and molten eruptions.

When the last of his men were through, Prowl jumped. He landed hard and rolled to a standstill. Chromedome lobbed a handful of grenades through the hatchway and slammed it closed.

Thanks to all the pre-battle reinforcements, the Archives Centre was now a mass of intersections and elaborate dead ends. The first escapees were already far ahead, pinned against the injured, chasing their shadow down spiralling stairwells.

Outside, the battle entered its final phase.

Another Autobot aircraft was pulled to the floor by enemy fire.

Another one of Sideswipe's men was murdered.

Another stream of Sharkticons foamed into the gutter.

This wasn't right. This wasn't right at all.

Where was the sky full of laserbeams and jet streams and never ending fire-fights? Where was the ocean thick with dumped bodies, with nuke-subs and bomb-pods and freshly capsized ships? Where were the raging banks of pea-green flame, the stuttering neutron bombs, the trenches turning deserts into diamonds of battered metal? Where were the scattered remains of billion-strong armies, reduced to cinders by the atomic blizzard, by the spiralling fringe of a nuclear wind? Where were the cityscapes, the techno-utopias so tall they poked holes in the troposphere, so deep they glowed at the base?

Cybertron was not what Centurion had expected. Thank God.

Instead of the above there was a cloudless sky; vast metallic tundra, endlessly blue, like concrete wrapped in tinted tinfoil; creases of land, pinched like pastry between finger and thumb; grease-thick liquid lapping against a skittish shoreline, inching forward, inching back, the tide having long since escaped any lunar grip.

Arriving on Cybertron, Centurion had experienced the full spectrum of emotions, a giddy sprint from Awe to Zeal. To him, a mechanoid who had travelled as far as London, it was the most unnatural place in the universe. For a few hours, at least...

Now, he was bored. He was bored of listening to his own footsteps, bored of the featureless plain and its alternating shades of blue and silver. To Wheeljack and Mainframe, this was home, plain old home: thrilling and depressing, full of hope and hopelessness. 820 surface-based quadrants, 26 city-states, two (contesting) capitals, two trans-continental mountain ranges, one artificial sea, the Rad Zone, the Acid Wastes, the Scud Run, the Sonic Canyons, and all the skewed geology inbetween.

That had been his geography lesson. After that, he was expected to keep quiet while his companions talked shop.

In short, he had expected the trek to the Sonic Canyons to be a Technicolor voyage through a vibrant, war-torn world; a world forever pitched on the brink of desolation. Instead he was stunned by the desolation, by the deafening silence. In its absence, war was everywhere. This was a world that was forever being killed, hour after hour, day after day. Even as an alien, as a dumbstruck stranger, he could easily imagine The End, that bleakly tender moment when Cybertron would at last be free, when the ever-decreasing population would suddenly hit zero. The sun would be black and silent, fogged by the glare of a

thousand photon bombs, and a haggard Empty – some wide-eyed little cripple with pipe-cleaner limbs – would climb from a manhole, realise he is the last one, and gratefully switch himself off.

They had been walking for hours. At some point – Centurion couldn't pinpoint exactly when – Wheeljack had transformed an armful of scrap metal into a slim-line communications device. Mainframe was programming it now. Bored with his own thoughts, Centurion tuned back into their conversation, which had somehow swung round to the undead.

'...coming out of the ground,' Wheeljack muttered, smoothing out the horizon with a gesture. 'As far as the eye could see. Thousands of them.'

'Have I missed something?' asked Centurion.

'Drifted off again, did we?' Mainframe did not look up from the box of circuitry in his hand. 'Wheeljack and I were remarking on the lack of activity around here.'

'We've yet to see one Decepticon air squad, a Harvester Unit, a demo-crew. It reminded me of something Ultra Magnus once told me, about the dead rising in Kalis.'

Mainframe snapped the comms box shut. 'There is always the possibility that the Quintessons have already attacked Cybertron. The central belt of city-states could have gone up in flames for all we know. The three of us might represent half the Autobots on this planet.' He handed the box to Wheeljack. 'I've done all I can but it's still short range – about a hundred miles.'

'The Canyons are over twice that distance away. We need to find an energy source, something we can tap into. A cyclic transmitter would do it. Even an ETS port.'

Centurion shielded his optics and pointed towards a spec on the horizon. 'What about that?'

'Good eyes,' muttered Wheeljack, flicking down his visor. He saw a crippled building, half sawmill, half bunker. Paper-thin and thumbed at the edges, it was built around a flaccid pylon, its spine wedged firmly under a cliff-face. He transformed and revved his engine. 'Follow me.'

Up close, with the sun exaggerating every defect, the spec looked less promising. Centuries of fallout had tanned the metal, giving it the tone and texture of a two pence piece. The words 'Crossways Outdoor Construction' were bent around the rim. Hunks of discarded machinery sat fat and happy in the sun, balding with age.

'Not much to look at,' concluded Wheeljack, dragging his hand along a pyramid of steel tubing. 'But you never know. Maybe inside there's something we can hook up to.'

The interior was bright with yesterday's sunlight. Conveyor belts, traction engines and process moulds were curtained off by grubby chains and piping. Legless servo-droids balanced on poles, their torsos layered with thinning continents of grime.

'The last tenant used this place to manufacture weapons,' said Wheeljack. 'Made a mint, too.'

Centurion prodded a servo-droid, who bobbed and tottered. 'This used to be a Decepticon outpost?'

'Who said anything about the Decepticons? Could've been run by an Autobot. Could've been Prime's main supplier.'

'At least all this indicates a power source,' said Mainframe, refusing to be sidetracked. He motioned towards a twisted stairwell. 'Let's find it.'

Halfway up and they saw it: a flickering light, loose and fractured against the wall, like TV pictures escaping from an upstairs room. Someone was here. Fuel pumps drummed to a faster beat as they edged onto the landing. Wheeljack reached the last doorframe, ducked down and glanced inside. A Transformer with his back turned was hunched over a console.

Wheeljack scoured the room for a weapon, or something he could make into a weapon, and then saw the symbol: thumb-sized, cherry red, standing out like a lipstick mark on the stranger's collar.

'It's okay, he's one of us.' Wheeljack ushered the others through the doorway and offered his hand. 'Excuse me? I don't believe we've met.'

Wafer-thin floor plating sprung into the air, jettisoned by a dozen spring-loaded weapons. The teetering barrels wheeled on the intruders, scribbling them with laser-lines and target tracks. Only then did the mysterious robot swing mechanically on his chair: a servo-droid with a gun barrel for a face.

'It's all been rigged,' said Wheeljack, turning on his heels. 'Who's doing this? Show yourself!'

The voice that boomed back was godlike in its omnipresence, its rumbling vacancy. 'By the Celestial Spires! Wheeljack! It *is* you!'

'So you *are* an Autobot! Shut down the weapons. We don't have time for this.'

'Dear, dear. Your fuse is as short as ever.' Now the voice was meek and mortal, with a specific point of origin (behind the nearest wall) and conversational intimacy. 'No need to get testy, Wheels.' A computer port bulged and shimmered, and a robot emerged from the hologramatic soup.

Wheeljack shielded his eyes. 'Sygnet?'

'Who else?' The circle of weaponry remained in place, fencing the newcomer off. He paced around the circle and pointed at Mainframe. 'Don't tell me, don't tell me... Mainwire. Mainline? *Mainframe!*' He cocked his head at Centurion. 'I don't know you, though. Have we met?'

'His name is Centurion,' Wheeljack sighed. 'Shut down the weapons, Sygnet. It's getting boring.'

'Last time I checked we were mortal enemies, but... oh, very well.' The weapons folded themselves away. 'I wasn't going to shoot you, anyway. You just triggered the automatic defences.'

'Ultra-sensitive pressure panelling with redraw decoys,' said Wheeljack, looking at the floor. 'Plus some sort of trigger membrane under-running the floor. Did you use a bioscanner or a clip-chip?'

'A bioscanner? Out here? Are you crazy? You'd be lucky to find a P827 in this dump! A bioscanner!' He pointed to hair-thin fissures around Centurion's feet. 'I kick-started a 3D engex radar.'

'Modified?'

'Standard calibration. Did the job.'

'Not bad. Should have recognised your handiwork.'

'You set all this up yourself?' Centurion sounded impressed, although he wasn't sure if it was appropriate. Sygnet was a Decepticon, but no one was treating him as such.

'Yeah, I'm quite pleased with the defences. I used materials from downstairs to knock together the weapon units and placed some weight-sensitive tiling outside.' He nodded to the Autofacsimile. 'Then I rigged this decoy - who, I must say, looks remarkably like Huffer before the Strikeforce Alpha upgrade - finger-spliced a hollowall, jack-knifed the vox-synth between quad-speakers and bang! A home-made defence den.' He drummed his fingers against his chin. 'It's the vox-synth I'm least happy with, to tell the truth. I wanted my voice to be bigger, more... commanding.'

'Any more "commanding" and I'd have sworn we were in the Primal Chamber,' said Mainframe, pushing his way towards a bank of computers. 'This all genuine?'

'Yes. Not much use though; outdated isn't the word. I've seen more advanced stuff in a Dead End squat.'

'Give me a few moments,' said Mainframe, seating himself at the keyboard.

Wheeljack turned to Sygnet. 'So. How come you're out here?'

'Two words: Quintesson invasion. They hit Polyhex yesterday morning. We were no match.' He shook his head. 'We did our best, but... an entire fleet. Thousands of them. It was a massacre. What about you? Why the Terbium Plains?'

'Same reason as you. We've just come from Autobot City, or what's left of it. I'd thought that we were their first target. We're trying to reach - oh, it doesn't matter. How come you're not leaking to death back in Polyhex?'

'What can I say? I ran. I made for the skies the moment Soundwave got it in the neck.'

'Soundwave's dead?'

'Yeah, how about that? The ground troops are always the easiest targets. When Darkmount went up in flames... well, let's just say it pays to know when to cut your losses.'

'You always were a coward, Sygnet.'

'Hey, I wasn't the only deserter. What was left of the Air Corps flew in all directions. Half of them were losing fuel or being pursued by those - oh, what they...?' He snapped his fingers, lunging for the right word. 'Tridents! I was one of the lucky ones. I managed to make it across the border. I may be a coward, but at least I'm a fuel-efficient one.'

'If that's how the entire Decepticon army fared against the Quintessons, I dread to think what's left of the Autobots on Earth.'

'I never said they attacked all the Decepticon army. Sixshot's group haven't been...' He pressed his hand over his mouth. 'Heh-heh. You make me forget myself, Wheels. They're out there somewhere, about two hundred of them. I've been trying to get in touch but they're not responding. I know the Comsat stuff in here is rusting to death, but...'

'There's still Prowl,' piped up Centurion, who had been listening with mounting unease, 'and everyone else in Diaclone.'

'It's Iacon,' said Wheeljack. 'And who's to say the Quintessons haven't got to them too?'

'What about your Sonic Canyons HQ?' asked Sygnet.

Mainframe looked up. 'How did you know about Delphi?'

'Common knowledge,' said Sygnet. 'Main base in the Archives Centre, auxiliary post in the Canyons. We've known about them for a while.' He shrugged. 'I really shouldn't be saying all this.'

'One way or another,' said Wheeljack, 'I don't suppose it matters now.'

The upstairs room seemed to change shape as overhead lights flickered on and off. After a moment of indecision, the filaments dulled to grey and the room sank a little lower, a little darker. A faint stretch of natural light fell across Mainframe's lifeless console. He looked up apologetically. 'That was the last of the power. The whole system was running on reserves.' He tossed the comms-box to Wheeljack. 'Didn't even get a chance to hook up.'

'Back to square one, then,' said Wheeljack. 'Let's head for the Canyons.' He peeled away the floor plating and took the lasers from their brackets. Centurion and Mainframe followed suit, then headed for the door.

'Isn't Sygnet coming with us?' whispered Centurion.

'I don't think he wants to,' said Wheeljack, ushering his team-mates ahead. He looked around. Sygnet was standing in front of the window, his expression studiously blank. 'Well?'

'Well what?'

'Are you coming with us or not?'

'A Decepticon and three Autobots. Nice ratio.'

'Fine. Stay here. Sit in the dark and wait for the Quintessons to find you.'

'And what makes you think they won't find you? If I join you I'll either end up dead or an Autobot prisoner.'

'At least this way you have a choice.' There was a long pause, during which Wheeljack fussed and fiddled with the words he was about to say. 'Besides, we might need... we might need someone with your talents.'

'Well why didn't you just *say* so?'

Xenon jabbed the pad once more, annoyed. 'What's happening, Haxian? Why can't I release the liquid?'

Inside the torture chamber, Galvatron gingerly raised an optic cover and wondered the same thing.

'I deactivated the release mechanism. And please commander, hear me out before you shoot me.' Haxian gestured at the monitor screen, where thousands of plot-points and schem-threads described a 3D Galvatron. 'He's incredible.'

'What am I looking at?' asked Xenon.

'This scan shows physiological complexity on a scale I've never seen – a level of internal construction thousands of years ahead of our own, ahead of the other Cybertronians we've tested.'

'And still he couldn't transform!'

'Hm. Perhaps – perhaps you misunderstand me, commander. We're looking at a robotic anomaly here. Something so powerful, so unique...'

'No, no, I understand. Thank you for stopping me. We came within a second of losing the most powerful weapon in our arsenal. It's funny how things come full circle, isn't it? How the same process informs the beginning and the end. Who would have thought, after all this time, that *we* would be learning from *them*... It's a strange feeling, when something takes on a life of its own. I sometimes think the whole universe is looped: this near-infinite curve which bends at the same speed, at the same angle, until it rejoins at source and we return, instantaneously, to Alpha Point. Perhaps we weren't meant to have loose ends. Have the guards take Galvatron back to his cell, Haxian. I need time to think.'

'I can't *go* any faster!' screamed Nightbeat, losing his voice to the preening wind. His vehicular mode had already melted into a watery strip of yellow and blue, disturbed only by the odd dash of exhaust fume or grit kick. 'Any faster and I'll start losing wheels!'

They were bombing along Expressway G, one the Scud Run's bastard turnoffs, and now, after years of wear and tear, little more than a wisp of titanium. Its carriageways had been skimmed and whittled, pruned to a greying thread. It was comically ruined, as if someone had airdropped a motorway from ten thousand feet. Even the potholes had potholes. The craters had craters. The cracks could barely hold themselves together.

Optimus Prime thundered alongside Nightbeat, riding the tufts and surface-shocks, ignoring the hailstorm of gunfire bearing down on him. Grapple and Hoist rolled about his trailer like ball bearings, dodging flippers and consoles. Sunstreaker led the convoy, screaming as he plunged headfirst through flame-waves and barricades.

The Quintesson frontier squad had found them as they were cruising through Yuss, emerging from the tattered fringe of the Acid Wastes in quiet procession. To them, the Autobots were Stragglers or Recycs or maybe even bona fide Grade As. Either way, the response was swift and simple: attack.

The six hoverbikes had come down hard, expecting an easy fight, their side-mounted blister cannons spitting gobs of tempered plasma. To say that he had never seen a Quintesson, Optimus reacted quickly, using the auto-launcher in his command deck to clip the nearest flyer. Sensing the nature of the impending battle, he'd ordered the slower Autobots into his trailer and headed for the nearest expressway.

Now, after innumerable near misses and a couple of direct hits, the convoy was heading toward a slashed and toothless tunnel; an underpass that undercut the foundations of the Yussian Embassy.

'What's happening out there?' asked Hoist, slumping into a chair and propping his head in his hands.

'We're cutting it fine, that's all,' said Optimus, swerving to avoid the latest shots. Behind him, the Quintessons dived close to the ground, their bodies hunched against the controls, their faces stuffed into conical windshields. 'Are you ready, Hoist?'

Hoist looked at the other passengers, not understanding Prime's question. 'Er... yes?'

The trailer roof split open and Hoist's chair was catapulted through the gap. He found himself bobbing in mid-air and grappling with the dual photon cannons that had sprouted from his seat. The roof re-sealed. He spun 180 degrees, lunged for the trigger and opened fire: the chair throbbed with recoil and the shots exploded like firecrackers around the enemy.

'40 seconds until we reach the underpass,' Optimus announced. 'Can you keep them busy 'til then?'

Hoist felt the gun-port bend into the slipstream. 'I'll do my best,' he said. A hoverbike exploded like a burst balloon and plunged off course. The Quintessons retaliated with careful lines of fire.

'Here we go!' yelled Sunstreaker from up ahead, as he slipped into the tunnel.

'I'm pulling you in, Hoist.'

There was a jolt a metal against metal and Hoist braced himself for retraction. Oil clung like sap to his brow as the hoverbikes bulged closer. He risked a downward glance. 'Well?'

'Something's fused the long-arm. I'm having trouble pulling you in.'

Quintesson gunfire chapped the lips of the tunnel. Hoist swivelled around, saw the low-lying ceiling, and screamed.

'Keep calm. Nightbeat, can you overtake me?'

Nightbeat willed a final burst of speed and slipped in front of the truck, his tyres melting into liquid rings. Warning signs dotted his dashboard like burst capillaries.

'When you reach the tunnel,' continued Optimus, 'I want you to transform and shoot at my front tyres.'

'You want me to what?!'

In the background, an overconfident Quintesson snagged some road-crust and ploughed his bike into an adjacent building.

Nightbeat applied the brakes, dragged two charcoal lines into the tunnel, and transformed. His hand was lost in a haze of twitches as he tried to align his weapon.

Prime thundered closer, making no allowances, and there was Hoist, perched on a stalk, swaying with the wind. Four hoverbikes flitted like mosquitoes in the background.

Nightbeat closed one eye and fired.

The shot missed its target but gouged a fresh hole in the road. Something ruptured – some gas-line or energon cable – or maybe he got lucky and the laser bolt pot-holed one of the propax reservoirs that underpinned most of Yuss. Whatever. Nightbeat fired, the motorway exploded, and Prime tipped sideways.



Hoist's torso was almost torn from his legs as the gunport smacked the road. Still travelling at two hundred miles per hour, Optimus Prime skidded into the tunnel and dragged his gunner along the walls: a tin can bouncing on a piece of string. By the time he had been dragged to a halt, Hoist was lying some distance away, Grapple was hammering to be let out, and the Quintessons had disappeared.

If Prime felt any pain when he transformed he hid it well. The gunport (minus gunner) was dragged into its housing. Grapple emerged like a newborn child, meek and fragile, from the back of the trailer. With a breath of sweet rust, Optimus Prime became robot once more. He helped Hoist to his feet. 'I'm sorry. Thank Primus you're alright.'

'Don't apologise. Your stunt worked. Madness, of course, but it worked.'

'Why haven't they followed us?' asked Sunstreaker, still wired from the chase.

An exhausted Nightbeat, cradled by the tunnel's curve, nodded in breathless agreement. 'Just what I was thinking. They were good pilots. A little change of environment shouldn't have stopped them.'

'We should be thankful of the reprieve,' muttered Prime, 'no matter how temporary.' His mind was elsewhere. Nightbeat had been watching him study the tunnel floor, and now he was measuring the distance between entrance and exit. They were standing at mid-point, where the light did not quite reach. The semi-circles of daylight at either end were bright enough to bleach the outside world, overwhelming all detail. Nightbeat was the first to see the Quintesson silhouettes. 'We're surrounded,' he said.

They heard an unfamiliar voice, inflated by the tunnel's acoustics. 'Cybertronians: lower your weapons and make your way slowly towards me. Surrender now and you will not be harmed.'

'What do they take us for?' snapped Sunstreaker. 'They've been trying to blow us off the road for the last ten minutes and now they expect us to – hey! Optimus!'

Prime was walking purposefully towards the enemy, holding his weapon by the barrel.

'What are you doing?' called Nightbeat.

'I'm going to talk to them.'

Nightbeat looked at the others for a reaction, and in moments they had caught up with their leader.

Outside, reinforcements had arrived. A fresh batch of Quintessons encircled them the moment the Autobots stepped out of the tunnel. Their armour blinked in the sun, as if they had just rolled off the production line. Their eyes were dewed and luminous, their fingers webbed with cladding, with mould-snap and surplus skin. It seemed as if some vague collective impulse still echoed in their neuranets, some universal program-code too strong to break down: when one shielded his eyes, his neighbour shuddered with an approximate gesture, as if a single thought had dominoed through the group.

Optimus laid down his weapon and faced the ringleader. 'What is your name?' he asked.

Q-142 smiled with surprise. 'Funny. I was about to ask you the same thing, Cybertronian.' He saw the symbol on Prime's chest. 'Or should I call you "Autobot"? You know, I can never tell.'

'Why were you chasing us?'

'Oh, you know... Tying up loose ends. We've gutted your base, by the way – the one underneath the solar generator? Everyone's dead, of course.'

'You're lying.' Prime looked at the weapon suddenly against his chest. He pushed the barrel aside with his index finger until met with resistance. 'You wanted to talk. You said we would come to no harm.'

'My orders were to retrieve any scattered Cybertronians, and you know what? Dead ones are far easier to transport.'

'I had hoped you Quintessons would be prepared to negotiate.'

'A Transformer extolling the virtues of negotiation? How novel. Tell me Autobot, where was your love of negotiation when you first swapped thermonuclear warheads with your enemy? Who preached the benefits of trust and diplomacy when millions of innocent people were dying by the day? Who crossed enemy lines carrying terms and conditions while you and your friends discussed the finer points of mutually assured destruction?'

'You talk as if you know us. You don't.'

'My dear Autobot, we know you far better than you think.'

Nightbeat, Grapple, Hoist and Sunstreaker felt gun barrels against the small of their backs. Not for the first time that day, Nightbeat wondered what Prime was playing at.

'You've entertained me long enough,' said Q-142, confident enough among the security of his men to rest a hand on Prime's shoulder. 'It's a shame I have to put you down.'

'Is there no other way?' Prime asked, proffering his upturned wrists. He moved the moment the Q-142 looked down: a double-punch across the Quintesson's face. The other Autobots rounded on their aggressors, and before fingers fell on triggers Prime had bundled everyone back into the tunnel.

'Let them go!' hacked Q-142, trying to reattach his dangling jawbone. 'They'll not get far.'

Nightbeat reached midpoint and wheeled in horror. The Quintessons on the other side were waiting with drawn weapons. 'We're trapped,' he said, 'and right back where we started!'

The Autobots hit the ground as the two sets of Quintessons opened fire. Laser flew over their heads in taut strings of red and yellow.

Q-142 looked at the bloated embassy building. It straddled the tunnel with greying thighs and buzzed with a kind of sweet-smelling decay, having spent the best part of four million years trying not to lose its balance. 'Bring it down!' he yelled. 'Crush the tunnel!'

'Everyone fire at the floor,' ordered Optimus, but there was no one to hear him. Sunstreaker, Hoist and Grapple had bolted for the exit, weapons blazing.

The embassy fell like a house of cards, 150 papery layers toppling towards a common core. Hovercyclists pumped ammo deep into the creases and the tunnel roof shook itself into a million pentagonal pieces.

Nightbeat grabbed Prime's arm. 'Optimus, please! I'm not leaving you here!'

The tunnel collapsed.

On Cybertron, the Past is inescapable. It exists as a frame of reference, a rigid table of comparison. After four million years of war, so much is defined by what it isn't, by what it used to be. Iacon is an ex-capital. The Golden Dome is an ex-council chamber. Transgalactica is an ex-spaceport. And every Autobot, every Decepticon, every side-swapping spy and counterspy – everyone is an ex-Cybertronian.

Once the jewel in the galactic crown, Cybertron has been scandalised and misappropriated, rebuilt into a vague shadow of its old self. Beneath its misshapen crust, however, one thing remains unchanged: the utility ducts. After millions of years of voracious recycling, the utility ducts are still utility ducts: a coiling network of rust-ridden tectomene tubing, thousands of miles long, dappled with bacilli and grime cultures as old as the First Ones themselves.

They even have their own language, a murmured vernacular that will still be heard when every dialect and comm-prog has been de-codified and unwritten: the metronomic drip of oil on sticky surfaces; the hum of warm liquid tumbling through anchored piping; the mildewed kiss of water against curved walls; the wheeze of rust, red as a waxy apple, as it prises itself from the copper-top ceilings.

Down in the ducts, the upper world is mythical; the lower world, the Underworld, is madness.

Prowl's Autobots were making slow progress. Halved by the Quintessons' aerial attack, halved again by Sideswipe's sacrifice, they now numbered less than two hundred. They were the leftovers, knee-deep in mech-waste. Prowl and Perceptor took the lead, then Kup, then Chromedome. The dead and the dying were somewhere near the back, supported by stronger Autobots.

Rev-Tone wondered what the local conditions were doing to his damaged legs. Even now he could feel the wounds re-opening, teased by the questing current, by the froth and bubbled scum. He focused on Quark's whispered voice and tried to ignore the pain.

'It's not that I'm not grateful to be here,' said his companion. 'Of course I am... it's just that I was given an order to stay and fight. You don't realise how it feels to run away.'

'I have three things to say to that, Quark. Firstly, no one but you and I know that you disobeyed orders. Secondly, one more Autobot isn't going to turn the tide of battle, is he? What use is an anthropologist against thousands of screaming Quintessons?'

'Yes, but if everyone thought like that we'd never—'

'My third point is the most important: I wanted you to come with me.'

'But it feels as if I've cheated – cheated Sideswipe and Scattershot and Gunrunner and everyone else who stayed behind...'

'...Getting slaughtered. We're a team, Quark! We stick together!'

Prowl craned his neck. 'Everything okay back there?' Rev-Tone waved the enquiry away and the Autobot leader went back to his own conversation with Perceptor:

'If Sideswipe can hold them at bay for an hour or so we should be able to reach AMC1. We might even have time to repair the our injured.'

Perceptor nodded and opened his mouth as if to speak. His eyes remained fixed on the liquid around his knees.

'You're very quiet, Perceptor. Is there something on your mind?'

'Yes. I was thinking about Nightbeat.'

'I thought I said that the subject was off limits. You were the one who convinced me that we were doing the right thing. It's just a shame we can't get fifty Optimus Primes to lead us.'

'Theoretically, you realise, there's no reason why we can't do that.'

'It was a joke.' Prowl shook his head. 'What am I doing? Pinning everything on Prime's arrival when we don't even know if the wormhole works! What if Nightbeat doesn't make it back? What if he never even made it to Lonium?'

'Perhaps I shouldn't have said anything. We must try not to think about it.'

Prowl shrugged. *Try not the think about it?* If only it were that simple. Hindsight was not beneficial; thinking did not give him pause; there was no value in self-reflection. His mind worked via displacement: he pushed one thought down and another rose to compensate. If it wasn't Nightbeat it was Sideswipe's team high above their heads; it was Sideswipe and Flanker and Wheelfire and all the other Autobots who had pulled the short straw.

His hasty retreat had been the latest in an ever-growing series of poor judgements. It was a bad joke: the Autobots' finest tactician making decisions that would embarrass Maccadam's heavies. He sensed accusation everywhere – in the way his men looked at him, in the shadows cast by mounting casualties, in the creases and folds of Rodimus Prime's quietly dying body. And then there was Kup, the embodiment of all his insecurity, his delirious self-doubt. True, Kup hadn't been the only one to challenge him or criticise his judgement, but he had done so with the most conviction, the most vehemence. He wondered if Kup actually hated him. It was a strange feeling.

Chromedome tapped him on the shoulder. 'Prowl? AMC1 is less than three miles away and I've been broadcasting advance messages since we dropped down here.'

'Glad to hear it. What's their situation? Can they handle our casualties?'

'I don't know. I can't get through to them.'

'Why? Is someone jamming your signal?'

'Worse. No one's answering.'

Quintesson transport pods clogged the sky like bacteria under a microscope, dark shapes trapped against pale glass. They slipped and spinnied, propelled by testex and petrol-punch, dragging shadows across the Manganese Mountains, across the oscillating peaks and troughs.

The guests had arrived.

Mount Edeus was fifteen miles away. Higher than the rest, wider than the rest, it was practically a conglomerate of mountains, a *mons mont accumululus*: a wedge of metallised crust that mocked the planet's curve. Perhaps, all those years ago, the Primal crucible had sprung a leak, and the liquid flames had not been checked until the molten gore had curled and cooled.

The top of Mount Edeus had been redecorated. The rugged summit still lunged for the sky, but the plateau had been reshaped into an aero-base that was simultaneously for and against all forms of approaching aircraft. Parallel runways and spotlights jostled for space amongst all manner of point/fire weaponry: plasma-ports, sit 'n' shoot swivel-mats, hummer-guns and sky-shredders. Surveillance outposts sat behind barbed wire fencing, little gun-grey kiosks ribboned with heatproof glass.

The first wave of transport pods taxied along the runway. Quintessons gathered around.

A wave of Decepticons poured from each pod, but it was a weak and brittle wave, heavy and half-thawed. Wrapped in electro-bonds and sorted into chain gangs, they stared at their feet as they were led towards the Kledji Concentration Camp. A Decepticon tripped and fell, dragging other prisoners with him, and a bright-eyed Sharkticon lashed out with an energy whip.

The spectators stood shoulder-to-shoulder and jeered at the parade. They had arrived: the cyberscum, the gun-fodder, the birth-cripples, the dumb and the stunted.

They had arrived, and he had screamed. Blitzwing didn't normally scream, but the Sharkticon's whip had dug deep, and now his back was weeping oil. He wouldn't stumble a second time; he would concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other; he would concentrate on the fat yellow band of engex linking his ankles; he would concentrate on the step, the stoop, the shuffle. People were watching him. People were spitting at him.

Blitzwing knew that he was in the Manganese Mountains but could not pinpoint his exact location. He thought about asking Brawl or Sinnertwin, who had been chained to his back ever since Polyhex, but no one was talking. There had been silence in the containment cells, silence in the transport pod, silence as they floated over Darkmount watching Quintessons pick and prod at what was left. Such a long journey...

He jerked backwards. Someone had tripped up behind him. A quick scuffle, a few tired yells, and the nearest guard waded in, waving his weapon. There was a sudden shot and he felt a web of cold oil splatter his back. When the guard disengaged himself he was streaked with black, and when the gang started moving again, Blitzwing could feel the drag of a dead body. Brawl or Sinnertwin?

Up ahead, entrance doors gave access to the mountain. He'd expected the interior to be pitch black but it was the opposite: an expanse of white so uniform that there seemed to be no doorways or edges or colliding dimensions: the people inside (guards and sentries with databoards and bent heads) were unencumbered by corner and crease.

The room boiled beneath panoplies of naked bulb. He felt his electro-bonds run cold and tried to look defiant when the scientists (he thought they were scientists) consulted their manuals and the engineers (he thought they were engineers) greased their knuckles. He felt their hands all over him – along with hammerheads and razorblades. Their voices sounded identical and danced around his head:

'Surrender all bio-mechanical shells, hybrid armament and—'

'—concealed weaponry and non-essential hardware for incineration—'

'Is this your primary anthropomorphic/meso-morphic configuration or do you—'

'—back-strut Inhibitor Claw operational and—'

'—have a secondary bipedal mode that—'

'—empty all endoskeletal compartments or similar subskin cavities—'

'—is your name, rank, allegiance—'

'—confiscate and destroy all extraneous appendages, including ancillary limbs and—'

He muttered vague answers, only half-understanding the questions. The scientists smiled at each other and jabbed their keypads. The engineers tore him apart. Off came the crumpled missile launchers, off came the laser ports, off came the empty ammunition compartments, off came the spikes and sharp edges – and after so much downscale, after so much cut-back and peel-away, he wondered what on Cybertron they'd leave behind – a spindly, fine-wire skeleton, perhaps, or a vulgar twist of nibbled metal; his optic bulbs would pendulum on stalks, his arms would taper to nothing.

Once the engineers had peeled away enough skin ('He is pure-form: excellent,' they would say, or 'Good: he is uni-shell') and the lights on the scientist's pads had stopped flashing, he was bundled into one of many side rooms. This one stank of varnish and synthanol. The walls, floor and ceiling were tiled. He noticed that there was a nozzle or plughole at the centre of each tile, and it worried him. A sudden suction glued him to the floor and then – in what can only be described as a spasm of colour and noise – the floor/walls/ceiling disgorged a torrent of fine red spray. He was trapped dead centre, lost in the spume, in the gush. The floor began firing electricity through his nerve circuitry, from boot-sole to scalp.

He thrashed about, of course, but eventually the shocks – and the shower – just stopped. He heard the patter of paint drops and opened his eyes. The room was entirely red, and so was he.

A Quintesson walked in wearing metal gloves and holding a weapon Blitzwing did not recognise. It had a standard butt and a standard loading cone, but the barrel was just a square of sizzling metal.

He hid his red face behind his red arms while another jolt from the floor froze him in place. The Quintesson grabbed him by the throat and pushed the branding iron deep into his forehead. The paint popped and rolled aside as the cranial casing puckered up. He did not struggle when the Quintesson led him into a new corridor. The fight had left him.

The corridor opened onto wide rectangular shaft. He was thrown inside a cell and huddled gratefully into the corner. The electro-bars crackled as they were resealed. He pushed his face close against the wall but its smoked surface struggled to return the image. He ran his finger across the scar on his forehead.

It was a letter.  
It was the letter A.

Ryknia drummed the windowpane and watched Decepticon POWs traipse the runway down below. Even the most Cybe-hating spectators had returned to their duties, but he was still enraptured by the sight of so many broken robots. The scene could have been lifted from the Book of Relinquishment in the Old Texts (re-christened the Book of Exile by propagandists).

'You've been staring out of that window for hours,' said Jolup, looking up from his databoard. 'It's enough to make me twitchy.'

The control room hummed with life. New spycams had been installed inside every cellblock, spray-booth and modification chamber, and now a wall of screens played popular scenes over and over again. The same establishing shot, the same cross-pan and close-up, but always with different actors: beatings, brandings, strippings, whippings.

'Quantax said he had been successful,' sighed Ryknia, peeling himself off the sill, 'but you know how he is with his stats: always likes to massage the figures and add a couple of noughts to make himself look good. Not this time, though – I never thought we'd get this many so early on. When do you think we'll get the first shipment of Inhibitor Chips?'

'Soon. Just sit down and relax.'

'I'll relax when every last one of the Cybertronians has been chipped.'

Jolup pulled his feet off the table in the middle of the room. 'What's up with you? You're acting like you've just been Harvested. You've been edgy ever since we started filling up the cells.' He checked his chronometer. 'Xenon said we'd have the chips by nightfall.'

'I just get these images of Cybertronians sharing a cell, tearing off each other's Inhibitor Claws and transforming into a damn battlecruiser or something. While we rely on external clamps we're taking a risk.'

Jolup kneaded his optics with both palms and went back to his databoard. Ryknia was fine when everything was going to plan – cool as the Majestrix himself, always making smart remarks – but as soon as there was a setback he turned into this firebomb of fizzing circuitry, tapping at the window, punching the air or rolling his heavy knuckles against one another. He was doing that now.

'Where's Sevax?' asked Ryknia. 'He's been gone for ages.'

'How the hell should I know? He's exploring. Perhaps when he comes back he can explain why he wanted everyone painted red. What did he call it? Destiny compression?'

'Identity Suppression. I knew you weren't listening. The theory is, you take away as much of the individual as possible, making one unique robot into one of thousands: compulsory uniformity. You start with the outside, with surface stuff – make them the same shape, the same colour – and then get to work on their mental state.'

'And that's when we get to use the shok batons, right?'

'Precisely. IDS works on the theory that individualism is relative: you need something to work against in order to formulate differentials. As a collective, the Cybertronians will find it difficult to react against each other. Erase the I-centred impulse and you start to erase philosophy, religion, ethics – even self-perception. Some of us think it should have been used during the Seeding – before the god-botherers started, you know, *adapting*. Would have saved us a lot of trouble.'

'Yeah, well. You can't turn back the clock.'

A rush of warm energy rippled the floor between the two Quintecons, signalling an arrival.

'Finally!' said Jolup, who slid off his chair and padded to Ryknia's side, ignoring Haxian's pre-launch advice on interstellar teleportation: if you're going to look, always keep your eye on the centre of disturbance. He and Ryknia shielded their eyes too late, and when the sudden explosion of light had faded there was an extra person in the room.

The stranger rocked gently back and forth in his teleport armour. His head was hidden underneath a helmet with a thin visor.

'Where's the shipment?' snapped Ryknia, shaking the teleporte by the arm. 'Ow!' He withdrew his hand and shook his smoking fingers.

'Don't look so surprised,' said Jolup, smiling. 'You don't hop, skip and jump across the galaxy without generating a little heat.'

The teleporteer unclipped his helmet. His real head seemed far too small for the black suit of armour. 'Lieutenant Ryknia, Lieutenant Sevax,' he said breathlessly. 'The Imperial Majestrix sends his greetings and hopes you will forgive the delay.'

Sevax strode into the room. 'Ah! I see the delivery boy is here, bringing much-needed supplies.'

The tele-armour fell away in generous chunks, and as it did so the lieutenants noticed the chrome box strapped to the soldier's stomach. Ryknia yanked it free and studied the contents.

'Inhibitor Chips. Enough to enslave this race a hundred times over.' He slid a finger through dunes of granular metal and scooped out a mountain. Magnifiers in his optics drew the image closer. 'Very nice... Haxian has surpassed himself with these.'

'This is all you need to implant them,' said the soldier, handing Jolup a syringe gun.

'Is this loaded?'

'Yes, sir.'

Jolup rolled the soldier into an arm lock and pressed the needle against his neck. 'Then let's test it out, shall we?' He heard the satisfying crack of punctured metal and relaxed his grip. The soldier knelt among the smoking tele-armour, pawing at his neck and looking as if he was about to cry.

'Transform, then,' said Jolup.

'I'm sorry, sir, I cannot.'

'Transform or I'll tear you apart!'

'I can't! I swear I can't!'

'That's enough. Jolup. Let him go.' Ryknia looked up from the Inhibitor Chips. 'There's a time for fun and games, but it isn't now.'

Jolup looked at Ryknia as if his optics were about to spit laser and motioned for the soldier beside him to stand. 'Report to the commanding officer at the main entrance and have him send someone to recharge your "spacesuit".'

The soldier walked awkwardly to the door and froze when he heard Ryknia's voice:

'I intend to plant an Inhibitor Chip in every single Cybertronian that passes through these gates. If any one of them – any single one of them – so much as semi-reconfigures, I will find you and I will kill you. Is that understood?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good. Dismissed.'

Jolup closed the door on the soldier and turned to Ryknia. 'You talk to me like that in front of a subordinate, in front of *anyone*, and I will shoot you where you stand. You are not my superior, Ryknia, nor have you ever been. I would kill Xenon himself if he raised his voice to me.'

Ryknia looked as if he had already prepared a reply, but held his tongue. 'My apologies, Jolup,' he said at length. 'I didn't realise you were so... sensitive.' He closed the lid of the chrome box and held it out as if it were a peace offering. 'I merely thought we had more immediate concerns, such as paralysing an entire race.'

Q-142 sat on a chromed hillside, surrounded by bobbing hoverbikes. The remains of the Yussian Embassy stretched ahead of him like a sea of powdered grey, girders and stanchions waving for help as they sunk beneath the surface. His troops trod the wreckage and prodded the air with bio-scanners.

'Found something,' said one, and grabbed a bright yellow elbow. A deactivated Sunstreaker slid from his hole like a gold ingot. Nearby, another Sharkticon tugged at Hoist and Grapple.

'Three out of five isn't bad,' said Q-142 as his men slung the Autobots over the backs of their hoverbikes. 'What about the big one and his friend?'

'Dead,' concluded a Sharkticon, folding up his bioscanner. 'These things can detect life signs and Vorcodes within a ten-mile radius. There's no one else.'

Q-142 straddled his bike and revved his engine. 'Oh well. We'll head for Polyhex and dump these three in the first Transit Pod we come across.'

'That was close. Yes, that was a definite approximation.'

'An approximation of what?'

‘A laugh. Well, a laugh of sorts. Certainly a smile.’

‘I’m afraid a smile is the best you’re going to get out of me,’ said Nightbeat, smoothing out a minor dent in his palm.

Optimus Prime tried to make himself comfortable using what little floor space he had. He stretched out on his side and propped his head on his hand. ‘Nevertheless, I am intrigued. What were you smiling about?’

‘I was just thinking about this. About now. About how I ended up stuck in a cubby-hole with the Optimus Prime of 1984.’ He shook his head dismissively, as if apologising for the misleading expression. He hadn’t meant to smile; he certainly did not find their predicament amusing. Perhaps his features were conspiring against him, reverting to some basic default code: happy or sad. Either that or he was going mad.

‘Smiling is better than laughing,’ said Optimus after some thought. ‘It means you’re in control.’

Nightbeat lay on his back and watched his headlights make patterns on the ceiling. Their hideaway seemed infinitely removed from everything else, like a bubble stuck to the ocean bed.

‘What is this place anyway?’

‘Are you familiar with High Circuitmaster Boltax? You might know him as Circuit 57. Anyway, he was the figurehead of the Theosophos Movement and a prophet of some stature. Lonium, Mismia and Yuss were all originally Theosophos settlements. When the C8 Conservation Summit failed – when was it? 1<sup>st</sup> Cycle 540? – and Sentinel Prime introduced energon rationing among the newly-founded Council States, Boltax sensed the beginnings of a civil war. By the time Vos and Tarn started stockpiling energon and grooming their military, his disciples had built a secret network of tunnels underneath Yuss, designed to ferry pilgrims into the Equatorial Territories. For a while, these catacombs were invaluable.’

‘How do you know about them?’

‘I was a follower of sorts.’

‘A disciple?’

‘In the loosest sense... Boltax was a pacifist who sought enlightenment through the systemisation of information. He looked for patterns and sort-codes, for the common assumptions that underwrote seemingly disparate belief systems. I found his observations enlightening. I came upon this network by accident, though, when the war was still fairly localised. It was supposed to be hidden from the military – there’s even a high density magnetic allow just beneath the surface that scrambles surveillance equipment. Boltax’s disciples could go undetected for days.’

Nightbeat wedged his feet against the ceiling and tried to extend his bunched-up leg springs. ‘At least his disciples could leave if they wanted. We’re trapped down here.’

‘At least we’re alive. I just hope the others are still functioning. I’m reunited with Hoist and Grapple and Sunstreaker and I lead them into something like this. I shouldn’t have approached the Quintesson.’

‘I’m sure the others are okay, and I’m sure they don’t hold a grudge. You don’t know how pleased they were to see you again.’

‘I still find this whole time travel business strange.’ He looked up at Nightbeat. ‘Do you think I’m overreacting?’

‘Overreacting? On the contrary, Optimus, I’m amazed you’ve taken this so well. Plucked from shutdown, brought thirty years into the future and thrown into battle against alien colonists... It’s not your everyday pattern of events.’

‘I’d almost hoped that I wouldn’t get a chance to reflect on what has happened. It’s funny – you say the others were pleased to see me again, and yet from my point of view I talked to them all a few days ago. In Sunstreaker’s case, practically this morning!’

‘Time brokers no favourites, Optimus. It won’t hold still and be studied. It’s a monstrous thing, too huge to comprehend.’

‘You think so? Perhaps it is only monstrous if you dare to step outside its boundaries.’

‘I’ve lived within its boundaries for four million years. It bears down on me every hour, every day – the weight of my past just gets heavier and heavier. Even by Transformer standards, I’ve lived several lifetimes. Four million years is too long, Optimus. Far too long. You and the others – I envied your sabbatical.’

‘Four million years... Four. Million. Years. Such a vast gulf of time reduced to three tiny words. What have I missed in four million years?’

‘Not much – and that’s the tragedy of it all. The war has swelled and contracted; it’s blazed into hemispheric conflicts and settled into suburban riots. The periods of recuperation last longer than most civilisations. It says something about the sheer futility of a war like ours when you can summarise four million years in a soundbite.’

‘I find it staggering that Autobot and Decepticon are still at each other’s throats. When I was young,’ (he waved his hand to erase the statement, muttering ‘I suppose I still am young,’) ‘I prayed this war would be over within months, within days. Hah! The naivety of youth. I was those “chosen one”, you know, grabbed from our ranks and thrust centre-stage. I was supposed to galvanise our army.’

‘I know, Optimus. I was there.’

‘Of course, of course. But four million years... Primus, if I’d known it was destined to last that long, I would never have accepted the position.’

‘Now come on, Optimus – you made a difference. And you continue to make a difference after you’re reactivated by the Ark.’

‘Whatever differences I make, whatever I achieve, it does not change what’s happening now. All my deeds and actions cannot forestall a war that is determined to rage so far into my future, a war that will probably continue until every last one of us is dead.’ He rolled his head back. ‘Forgive me, Nightbeat. I’m not usually like this.’

‘It’s called Coming To Terms With Things, so don’t apologise.’ Nightbeat dimmed his headlights: there was no point wasting energy. ‘What I said before, about nothing changing... I was lying. Things do change. The war you woke up to today isn’t the one you left four million years ago. As much as I’d love to describe every life-changing event that’s occurred between then and now, you know I can’t. You must understand, Optimus. Because of causality and paradoxes and god knows what – I simply cannot.’

‘I understand. I’m an anomaly. I’ve broken time’s rules. But if I’m needed, so be it. Just tell me why.’

‘I told you before, I—’

‘You fed me the official line. If I didn’t know better, I’d say it was one of Prowl’s.’

‘It’s funny you should say that. Prowl’s in charge nowadays, ever since Rodimus Pr—ever since our leader, Rodimus, fell into a coma.’ He realised what he’d just said and, more importantly, what he’d stopped himself saying. Optimus stared at him, and he could sense movement behind the eyes: new thoughts, new questions. The comment hadn’t gone unnoticed. Prime was going to ask The Question.

‘I was wondering, Nightbeat, where am I in all of this? Where is the Optimus Prime of 2012?’

For a micro-second, Nightbeat was ready to explain. The sentences gelled in his head, brief but balanced, and the moment he had been fighting against since Prowl’s whispered instruction seemed almost trivial. It was no big deal: Prime deserved the truth. And then suddenly – violently – common sense came rushing back. A heart-stopping jolt of pity washed the words from his mouth and he held back. He withdrew from the precipice, overwhelmed by how close he had come to falling. How could he tell the truth? How could he tell this robot – this talkative, aloof, frightened, fearless robot – that he would die *three years* after reactivation, that his hunched-up, bunched-up body would be squeezed into a funeral barge and shot into space after 238 hours of fruitless surgery?

‘Optimus... you go missing in 2005.’ The words felt flat and false in his mouth. ‘You were on a mission to Hydrus Four with—’

‘Stop!’

Nightbeat flinched. He’d never been any good at lying.

‘I don’t want to know any more, in fact I wish I hadn’t asked the question. It was selfish.’

Selfish! Nightbeat didn’t know whether to feel relieved or annoyed. How dare he not demand to know his fate? Who gave him the right to be so selfless, so flippantly noble? If it had been him, Nightbeat, who had been dragged into the future, he’d have been driven mad by possibilities, talked of how/who/why/where/when/what *and nothing else*.

‘You said I was here because the Autobots were in crisis. That is enough. Let me concentrate on that alone. If you can explain why they’re in trouble...’

‘It all begins with the Quintessons...’ As he talked, Nightbeat thought of the mind-purge device inside his waist compartment (and, fleetingly, of another, more personal object behind his chest plate). Perhaps it didn’t matter what Prime knew, as everything could be erased at the touch of a bright red button. Electronic pulses would ferret through Prime’s brain, rewriting his mnemonic script: light-fingered



purge-codes would scissor away the hints and spoilers and giveaways. But even so, no one should be forced to live with the knowledge of their inevitable death, no matter how fleetingly. No one.

‘Are you okay?’ said Optimus.

‘Sorry?’

‘You began talking about the Quintessons and then something distracted you.’

‘I drifted off. Er, the Quintessons. Okay. Right. They’re a nomadic race of mechanicals who once acted as enforcers for... a galactic tyrant. We knew about them by reputation. It seems they knew rather more about us. They once earmarked Cybertron as a planet ripe for colonisation. Number one in a list of one.’ God knows why, he thought to himself – out of the millions of Empire-owned, fresh-from-the-furnace cyberformed replicas dotted across the galactic spiral, the Quints wanted the tatty old original. ‘They launched an ill-judged attack on us four years ago, when their home planet was on the way out. We won. They disappeared.’

‘Until now.’

‘Yes. Galvatron...’ He stopped. Self-censorship was difficult. He thought again of the mind-purge and the get-out clause it offered. ‘Galvatron, the Decepticon leader, was abducted a few days ago. A high-ranking Autobot called Thunderclash was snatched shortly afterwards.’

‘So they’re picking off your leaders.’

‘Precisely. Next thing we know, a Quintesson space fleet is bearing down on Polyhex.’

‘Prowl assumes the Autobots are next and takes precautionary measures.’

Nightbeat spread his hands. ‘You.’

‘I’m your secret weapon?’

‘It’s not exactly one against an army. There are still a large number of Autobots on Earth – a planet you’ll become familiar with in time – and, of course, the main Resistance cell in Iacon. Siren – remember him? – commands a small team in the Sonic Canyons. So we’re not exactly short of manpower. Sorry if this embarrasses you, but we needed a leader.’

‘I suppose I should feel flattered. Thank you for filling me in. I appreciate that you risk a lot by telling me anything.’

‘Yes, well... Perhaps I was being overcautious before.’ Nightbeat prodded his abdomen like a doctor mapping lines of pain. ‘This is called a mind-purge.’

Optimus inspected the object. ‘Intricate. I’ve never seen anything like it – but then I have missed millions of years of technology.’

‘It’s a recent invention, actually. One of Perceptor’s.’

‘Ah yes, Perceptor. Molecular scientist. Dabbles in metallurgy and quantum mechanics. Posted in Eocra.’

‘He’s a senior officer now. He and Prowl masterminded your abduction. This device is their safety net. It taps into your thought-stream and impairs recollective interface... those are Perceptor’s words, not mine.’

‘So it doesn’t actually erase your memories?’

‘I suppose not, no.’ Nightbeat leant forward (awkwardly) and pointed to a slim rectangle of controls. ‘This microprocessor can be magnetically attached to the wearer’s scalp, or you can activate this remote control and generate a psionic field which affects people within a certain range.’

‘In case I make a run for it, eh?’ Optimus laughed. ‘I’m sorry, but it’s all very clever, isn’t it? Once I’ve played my part you can bury all my memories of this jaunt and drop me off in 1984, none the wiser.’ He handed back the device as if it were a broken toy. ‘No puzzling knowledge of my future, no artificial foresight, no deliberate re-engineering of events. For all I know this might be the hundredth time I’ve been abducted.’

Nightbeat looked aghast. ‘I promise you, we’ve never – ah. I see. You’re joking. If this all goes to plan – and I admit that it’s a very audacious plan – you and I return to the wormhole after this mess is sorted out, I zap you with this gadget and it’s as if nothing happened.’ He couldn’t believe he was talking to a Matrix Holder like this, as if he was a lowly ridge trooper. ‘After all, would you choose to know what’s going to happen to you?’

‘I can think of nothing worse. High Command need not worry, Nightbeat. I have no objection to you insulating my mind against these future shocks. That device is my safety net, not yours.’

They fell silent. Nightbeat stood as best he could and arched his back against the ceiling, trying to force an opening.

‘Why are you on this mission, Nightbeat?’

‘It seems I have a knack for temporal anomalies. My original mission was to collapse the wormhole, but the invasion changed all that.’

‘That’s not what I mean. I know why you were chosen for this mission: you’re methodical, astute and rational. And these are admirable qualities, but they make me wonder why you agreed to do something you appear to find morally distasteful.’

Nightbeat sat down. ‘Go on.’

‘I’ve been grappling with both the ethical and causal aspects of my time-jump ever since you briefed me outside the temple, and I know that you and I think along similar lines. I know you would have pondered the implications of what is, essentially, an insanely dangerous stunt. So why did you do it, Nightbeat? What possible argument, what theory persuaded you to ignore your concerns?’

Nightbeat knew that all the persuasion he needed was contained in a glass orb inside his chest. He could not meet Prime’s gaze but he knew the expression (he was already getting used to it): kind yet remote, open but scored with a thousand hidden concerns. He trusted Prime (everyone trusted Prime), but did he trust him enough to explain himself – to quite literally open up to him?

Without looking up, without tearing his eyes from the floor, he pulled the orb from his chest and said, ‘This is my reason, Optimus. You’re looking at everything I am. Everything I’ve become.’

Suspended at the core of the glassen crystal was a miniature helmet of pristine blue. Nightbeat’s dampened headlights prised across the cool transparency, slashing rainbows across its orbit. Optimus bent closer and Nightbeat magnetically withdrew. He shielded the orb with a trembling hand and began to explain.

‘27 years ago, interracial bioengineering peaked with the hybridisation of organic and metallic material. Tiny bipedal creatures – Nebulans – were encased in armour that could transform them into the head, engine or weapon of their Cybertronian host. They were also linked symbiotically, mentally adjoined on a thought-by-thought level to increase strength, speed, firepower and reaction time. Two minds are better than one, you could say.’

‘Nebulan scientists called the whole process “binary bonding”; our techies called it “transgenic splicing”. Not everyone was as dispassionate: Cybertronian protestors, Autobot and Decepticon alike, claimed that the first batch of volunteers had tainted what became known as the Vorpool and compromised our racial purity. While the binary-bonded volunteers called themselves “Headmasters” and “Targetmasters” and “Powermasters”, the protestors used rather more damning sobriquets. They called them bastards and Offshoots and Half-breeds. Particular spite was reserved for those who unconsciously rejected the mind-meld and, as a result, became disfigured on a molecular level: they were the lowest of the low. They were called Muties.’

Optimus said nothing. His eyes were closed in rapt interest. If he was shocked, appalled or angered by these revelations, it did not show.

‘The process was seen an extreme reaction to a bizarre set of circumstances. But you know what they say, Optimus – you can’t push the cork back in the bottle. The code had been cracked, the phrases coined, and a new generation of Transformers had been created. These revitalised robots re-entered the war with their new partners and, over the next few years, the technology was transferred from Nebulos to Cybertron, culminating in a second batch. I was part of the second generation of Headmasters.’

‘But what about the protestors? Weren’t you afraid of being ostracised?’

‘I’m used to it – or at least I was in my youth.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Do you remember seeing me before 3<sup>rd</sup> Cycle 270?’

‘3<sup>rd</sup> Cycle 270? But that was when — ah.’

‘Exactly. Anyway, I wasn’t a “pure” Headmaster. They partnered me with a quasi-autonomous hominid robot, a mekanid, who could transform into a replica of my original head. There was no mind-link, no shared consciousness: in Fixit’s words, he was simply a remote-controlled duomodal appendage designed to generate confusion in battle.’

‘We worked together until 1994, when I self-destructed. My brain module was shielded but everything else was atomised, including my “partner”. When I was rebuilt, I handpicked another off-the-

shelf identikit drone, thankful for anything that could give me the edge in battle. I spent a few months undercover as a Pretender – don't ask – before joining a band of Autobots for an unscheduled galactic tour. During that mission I was seriously injured and awoke with a regular head.' He looked up for the first time. 'Sorry, I'm sitting here giving you my life story. This must be incredibly dull.'

'Not at all. Carry on.'

'In 2006 I volunteered for a new type of binary bonding. Bioengineers had, over the years, discovered that the process ultimately led to total cross-absorption: Transformer and carbon-based life gelled on every level – physically and mentally – and two halves became one inseparable whole. Anyway, they found a way to accelerate the process. I was dubious, but volunteered – well, I say volunteered. High Command knew I had experience with mekanids and it was "suggested" that I put myself forward.' He paused at a fork in the conversation, trying to decide the best way to continue. 'Optimus, there's an organic species – they call themselves *Homo sapiens* – that eventually populate the planet on which you crashed.' Prime's eyes widened; Nightbeat did not notice. 'In 2006 I was binary bonded to one of these organic creatures. I nicknamed him Muzzle.'

Nightbeat's shoulders slumped into a convex curve, robbed of tension. Just saying Muzzle's name – surely that was progress; surely that was something. He placed the orb on the floor between them.

'I won't waste words trying to articulate how I felt about him and vice versa. I wouldn't know where to begin, I really wouldn't. Muzzle was my best friend. Our minds overlapped seamlessly. Right from the outset it was difficult to know where he ended and I began. The biotechnicians said we were the most compatible partners ever; they said we represented some blip, some loosely pencilled equation way off their probability charts. They did everything they could to prove that we weren't a scientific anomaly – anything to translate their wide-eyed wonder into something explainable, something with cosines or compounds or decimal points. They composed scientific mantras, they scribbled strings of binary, they filled a thousand databoards with waves of seasick numerals. And all the while Muzzle and I just weren't interested.'

Nightbeat tapped his forehead. 'You can't imagine, Optimus, what it's like to have someone in here, someone who shares your every feeling – someone who feels the very joins between your thoughts. Everything about me was laid bare, and it didn't matter – because everything that was Muzzle was open to me too. We were reflected in each other.'

'It lasted three years. In the summer of 2008, Muzzle was diagnosed as suffering from an unknown strain of colorectal cancer. Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> June... He returned from routine surgery – it was the first time we'd been separated since the operation – and I knew as soon as we re-engaged. I knew *everything*.

'Over the next few months I became familiar with hateful human terms: *Adenomas*. *Dysplasia*. *Metastasis*. *Ad enocarcinomas*. And of course the doctors couldn't do anything to help him because by this point he was practically half alien. Three years with me and his DNA had been branched and tweaked and tinkered: new buds had been cultivated or hacked off by the blades and clamps and nanos of my neuronet – hell, we were lucky that High Command even allowed the tests to continue. Our biotechnicians were powerless too – in fact they were convinced he was proof of a new strain of humanity, *Homo extremis*.

'In the end, all anyone could give him was a projected date of death. Muzzle insisted on maintaining the binary bond. Can you imagine? I knew *I* was immortal. I knew *I* would go unharmed; it didn't matter if his immune system collapsed, it didn't matter if twitching pockets of lymph nodes and stromal tumours jostled for space on the wall of his colon. No weakness of the flesh could affect *me*.

'As a Transformer, death it is eternally remote – in fact it's practically an abstraction. Look at us! We get blown to pieces; we get rebuilt. We self-destruct and wake up inside a stasis pod. Bombed, brutalised, beheaded – we never stare Death in the face because we're never sure what he looks like. Humans see him every time they look in the mirror.'

'Muzzle and I lived through his illness as one: billions of emotions filtered through our shared consciousness, shades of feeling I had never experienced. In a way, I think I came to recognise mortality. And yet all the while we knew that one would die and one would not, and so I could never truly say that I understood. We were together until the end. During the last few days, when Muzzle was drifting in and out of consciousness, I was forbidden any enemy contact. We were shuttled to Antarctica and left alone with a communicube and a homing device.'

'At 4.14am on Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> October 2009, my best friend died. There was no warning, just a sudden, infinite silence in my mind.'

‘Ten days later a different me awoke on Fixit’s operating table. They’d found me half-buried in the snow after involuntary systems shutdown. I’d been rebuilt with yet another new head – this one – after medics spent two days trying to extricate Muzzle’s dead body from my neck.

‘Muzzle’s family had reclaimed the body while I was offline. They buried him in an Earthen cemetery.’ Nightbeat scooped up the orb and turned it in the light. ‘This helmet was all that was left behind. I’ve hidden it inside me ever since. In some lurid, rudimentary way, it means we’re still together.’

Optimus watched Nightbeat clip the orb back inside his chest, where it winked and nestled like a naked Matrix.

‘I can’t describe the grief without somehow trivialising Muzzle’s death, but – but imagine losing a limb. No, imagine losing an emotion. Imagine suddenly, without warning, being unable to feel sadness, or anger, or joy. Muzzle’s death shut a part of me down... are you alright, Optimus?’

‘Sorry?’

‘You were staring at me.’

‘I was just thinking about what you said.’

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to unload my emotional baggage.’

‘You did nothing wrong.’

‘I’ve never really told anybody before. Not like that, anyway – not so brutally. I’d be grateful if you didn’t mention it to anyone else. Despite what I’ve just said, I like to keep my thoughts – and my past – under wraps.’

‘In that sense we are alike.’

There was a long pause, both robots wondering what to say next. In the end it was Optimus that spoke:

‘Nightbeat... you realise that you didn’t have to tell me any of that. I didn’t mean to pry.’

‘To tell you the truth, it’s a relief to get it off my chest.’

‘Nevertheless, I feel I owe you something in return... or maybe I just want to disencumber myself.’

‘Really, Prime, there’s no need to—’

‘Do you know why I joined the Autobots?’

‘Excuse me?’ Despite the rambling preamble, the question was so sudden, so brutal in its simplicity, that it caught Nightbeat off guard. Besides, he *knew* why Optimus Prime (or Orion Pax, as he was known before the Matrixmerge) had joined the Autobots: everyone knew. Hell, it was practically written into everyone’s circuit boards; it was scribbled in the margins of the Autobot Codebook. Why had Prime joined the Autobots? Because he was the Chosen One, the Saviour. It was nothing less than Destiny, Destiny with a big fat capital D. And even if Nightbeat – poor, cynical Nightbeat – had his doubts about fate, about the certainty of chance and the paucity of choice, even if he waved away every so-called ‘validation’ of the Primal Prophecies (hey, with good enough hindsight, you could spot anything), even if he did all that, some things remained sacred. Prime’s pre-trodden path from morph-birth to Matrix Bearer was one of them.

‘I know why you joined the Autobots,’ said Nightbeat. ‘Primus came to you in a dream and warned you of the threat that Megatron posed. You alone took the Decepticon menace seriously, and lobbied the Council to adopt an interventionist policy.’

‘Yes, that would be the accepted version of events.’

‘That’s not what happened?’

‘Sometimes it’s easier to let others build stories up around you. Wherever it came from, the divine intervention story got me noticed. While it held little sway over Tomaandi, Traachon and the other councillors, it struck a chord with the general populace and made me famous outside Iacon.’

Nightbeat was listening intently now. There was candid and there was *candid*; he’d never heard Optimus speak like this before.

‘I’ll tell you why I joined the Autobot military: because of Kospen Menti.’

‘I’m sorry, who?’

‘You mean “what”. You’ll remember that I was once a champion athlete, known for my prowess in the State Games. I don’t know if you’re familiar with the rules of the Games, but you have to obey gladiatorial etiquette – fighting techniques extend to pitch and parry, cut and thrust. Mystical combat disciplines like Metallikato and Circuit-Su are forbidden.’

‘And Kospen Menti...?’

‘Is a Metallikatoan manoeuvre. It was used against me only once, in the last ever State Games.’

‘You fought Megatron.’

‘And lost.’ Prime lowered his voice and broke eye contact. ‘I lost because he cheated – he floored me using Kospen Menti. I would have beaten him, Nightbeat. I would have taken him down, but he cheated.’

‘I watched the fight from inside Maccadam’s,’ said Nightbeat, remembering the old days of sitting alone in public places, trying to ignore the taunts and outright hostility (as if he had A/000007 branded across his forehead). ‘I remember Megatron’s battle slogan – all that “one will stand, one will fall” rubbish. You were taking the lead up until the last round, when he nearly took your leg off.’

‘Kospen Menti,’ said Optimus again, deep in thought. ‘The Prime Regent, that *idiot* Triax, should’ve called a foul, but he was too busy gawping at what Megatron did next to care about a *direct contravention* of Rule 184, sub-paragraph seven.’

Nightbeat stared at his feet, somewhat uncomfortable. “What happened next”, as Prime so flippantly put it, had signalled the end of the Golden Age and the beginning – in so many ways – of the War.

‘A few weeks after the final,’ continued Optimus, ‘was the first major Decepticon rally. Having won so many supporters after the States Games final, Megatron chose this occasion to unveil the Decepticon Manifesto.’

‘Yes!’ said Nightbeat, happy to be back on familiar ground. ‘You rushed the stage in protest. I remember seeing the newscast on the CyberNet. It took six guards to pin you down.’

‘I did storm the stage – but it wasn’t to denounce the Decepticon Manifesto. Hell, I’d not even read the Manifesto all the way through – I didn’t even know that Megatron wanted to turn Cybertron into a mobile battle station. I went to Tarn with the intention of humiliating Megatron – I wanted a rematch. I wanted an audience of billions to see the record set straight. I know, I know – you’ve every right to look horrified. Ironically, though, it was that incident that opened my eyes to the Decepticon menace. As I was hauled backstage and handcuffed—’

‘Handcuffed?! They arrested you?!’

‘Yes... I had to spend three nights in the cells. Xaaron wiped my criminal record and debugged me after I started displaying the Signs of Affinity. You can’t have a Matrix Bearer-to-be with a crim-chip in his wrist.’ Optimus waited for Nightbeat’s incredulity to fade. ‘Anyway, the Enforcers took me backstage, where I listened to Megatron’s famous “Peace Through Tyranny” speech. It was then I realised the full horror of what was happening – of what was about to happen. My eyes were opened, as they say. Being blessed with a Primal vision or being pushed into a justice wagon – it makes no difference, the result was the same. This was my epiphany. I often wonder what would have happened if Prowl and the others hadn’t managed to pin me down before I could throw the first punch.’

‘Something tells me you’d have joined the army eventually.’

‘Maybe. But I tell you, Nightbeat, sometimes I wish I’d made it across that stage.’

Afterburner trained his rifle on the entrance to AMC1 and called to the others. While his voice bounced from wall to wall (‘They’re inside! They’re inside!’), his torch beam skirted the edge of a gaping hole, inches above water level.

Prowl was first around the corner. ‘Shut up!’ he hissed, then spun around to halt the Autobots at his heels.

‘What are we waiting for?’ Kup demanded, pushing through the crowd. ‘They’ve beaten us to our own hospital! Come on!’

‘Wait,’ said Prowl. ‘Let me think. I can’t work out how the Quintessons were able to overtake us without—’

‘Who cares?! Rodimus is in there!’ Kup splashed towards the entrance, weapon in hand.

‘There’s an alternate route,’ said Quark. ‘A topside crater that gives access to the northern tunnels. Red Alert was going to have it sealed...’

Prowl tested the alignment of his rifle sights and waved the barrel at the frontline. ‘You six follow me. The rest of you take cover.’

Kup followed Prowl’s team into the medcentre. Their rifle-mounted torches sent soft red target lines down the corridor. Far away, beyond a dozen dead doorways, a lonely exit sign switched itself on and off.

Keeping his rifle tight against his shoulder, Prowl signalled for his troops to split into pairs and inspect the wards: Tacker and Rad, Rev-Tone and Quark, Spindle and Chromedome. Kup steamed ahead, alone. Prowl caught up with him outside Rodimus Prime's medivault. Inside, their ex-leader was still hooked to a modest life support machine. A jumpy bioline threw light across his face.

Kup spread his hands around the porthole. 'Thank god. Perhaps the Quintessons didn't see him. Perhaps they didn't *recognise* him.'

'Oh, I think they did,' Prowl said quietly, and swept hot torchlight across the back of Kup's legs. The vault door was covered in bullet holes. 'They couldn't get to him, but it wasn't for want of trying.'

Rev-Tone's yell – so sudden, so unlike him – dragged them away from the medivault. They ran through corridors, dodging wheelchairs and hardware trays, and found him outside ward B. Quark was there too, hugging the doorframe.

Prowl slowed to a jog. 'You scared us! What have you found?'

Rev-Tone pushed him into the darkened ward. It was full of Autobots, full of patients lying on their backs and on their beds. None of them had heads.

Prowl moved between the slabs, pale and trance-like, pushed by the same morbid force that turned his head from side to side. His torch beam picked out details he didn't want to see: the open hand, bowled with tension, the splintered rabbit between chin and cheekbone, the daisy chain of shallow craters. These people used to have names: Torpok, Highslide, Ammo, Elion, Slipstream, Warpath, Hookjaw. Now they were just shapes, collisions of metal and microchip: dead things. Clips, jackets and cartridges swam around his feet, dusky and hollow. He shook himself from his stupor as Kup and Quark ran to an unoccupied slab in the corner of the ward.

Red Alert was bunched in the corner. He said something, but the words followed their own pattern, their own semantic symmetry. Prowl groped for the nearest circuit slab, desperate for support; he tried to think of something to say, some order to give, but all he could do was watch. Red Alert's body moaned like stressed wood as it was lifted. The floor retained a map of his injuries, an archipelago of grease.

Chromedome sprinted into the ward brandishing an energon resuscitator and pulling a trolley-mounted surge-pack. He crashed against the slab, shouldered Prowl out the way and primed the resus-pads. The energy reading reached a neon peak ('Clear!') and Chromedome thrust the pads against Red Alert's chest. The security officer arced towards the ceiling. A silky thread of electricity tied the two pads together, lingering as Chromedome withdrew.

'He's not dead!' Kup yelled, keeping well back. 'I heard him speak!'

Chromedome kicked the trolley. 'Come on... *come on*. Yes! Clear!' He pressed the pads deep into Red Alert's chest. A ball of lightning splayed the bedside crowd and danced across the ceiling, leaping between strip lights. Red Alert was skewed by the central fork, smaller threads webbing his eyes, hands and feet. Only his heels and shoulder blades touched the slab; his body had become one big photoelectric cell.

The resuscitator expired in a scrabble of sparks, the pads gorged on overload and Chromedome was catapulted across the ward. His matt-black hands carved a ten-lane trail in the air before he crashed into three occupied circuit slabs.

Smoke curled out of Red Alert's mouth as if a spirit was leaving his body. Prowl nursed him upright and turned his face from side to side, waiting until the smoke-rimmed eyes were wide and attentive. 'You're going to be okay, Red. You're going to be okay.' He looked up sharply. 'Someone see to Chromedome.'

But Chromedome was already stirring: somewhere deep among the crash site, among the red and white pile-up of pumps and lube-feeds, his body was cooling and contracting. He looked like a matchstick cap, dragged and flamed. Surplus energon fizzed and nibbled at his swiv-joints and body-junctures, but apart from that – apart from the cocaine blitz of systems overdose, of looped reflexes and delirium tremens – he seemed okay.

There was an odd sound – scraping chairs, perhaps, or nails skimming a blackboard – and fresh smoke bulged from Red Alert's mouth.

'I think he's trying to speak,' said Quark. 'Can someone fix his vocal synthesiser?'

'I'll have a go,' said Kup, flexing his fingers and wrists. He looked as if he was going to unblock a drain.

Prowl made his way to the door. 'Kup and Chromedome can look after him; buzz me when he's talking again. I want everyone else to check the other wards for survivors.' He stepped into the corridor and saw Perceptor. 'The Quintessons did get here first. We've just discovered the bodies.'

'Inevitable, I suppose, that they should capitalise on their advantage.'

'You make it sound like a Fullstasis move.'

'Not at all. I was merely pointing out the logic in their actions.'

'I don't think this is the time or the place to discuss logic.'

'You think I'm being insensitive, but you and I have a responsibility to look at this dispassionately. Divining the Quintessons' strategy from their actions is one way we can keep a step ahead of them.'

'They slaughtered them in their beds, Perceptor! Walk into that ward and let's have this conversation again!'

'If you're implying that... what is it, Rad?'

'Sorry sirs, but we've found something else.'

Prowl followed Rad to the operating theatre. The room twitched under a honeycomb of spotlights and frosted glass, and when they stepped inside they left their shadows at the door. Just as well, because there was no room on the floor: it was covered with body parts. Finger splints, thumb-frames, lumbar supports, optic bulbs, cranial casing, a spinal strut (curled), a chest plate (near mint – scuffed in one corner), a voxbox – everything arranged like model parts on an Airfix frame. Even the wiring had been unwound, and though the fuel pump was ringed with fat drops of oil it was pared down to its bare minimum: three pipes and a puckered antrum. Thousands of microchips had been sifted and separated into a silver mosaic that probably looked like Primus' frowning face from a high enough balcony.

High up on the far wall was First Aid's cruciform skeleton, outlined by a hundred jutting scalpels. He had no skull, no eyes, no brain module. His facemask, pocked and socketed, was tilted at a questioning angle above his shoulders.

The Helio Generator Complex was gone and Iacon had a new kink in its landscape. The jumbled surface tricked the sunlight, bending it this way and that. There was no unity here, no binding force to cauterise or thicken. The wasteland pulsed with its own deadening rhythm, its own sound-slur and trace echo, as if the smash and grab battle, visually absent, was still raging sonically: a superimposition of past on present, then on now, with the same snipes and strafes and suicides happening again and again and again.

And as it was in Iacon, so it was in Polyhex; and Lonium, and Mytharc, and Tensk and Vos and Tyrest – every battle ever fought would rage forever, translated into waves and pulses that bounced among the debris. In every suburb and quadrant and city-state, the screams and gunshots were woven into the air. Cybertron was already wrapped in centuries of sound; by the Omega Point, by the End Days, it would be bandaged in pure white noise.

Quintesson Assessment Squads dragged their feet across the basin where the Archives Centre had been, carrying their usual toys and accessories. A dozen dead Sharkticons garnished every Cybertronian corpse; Tridents surrounded every crumpled Autobot aircraft. Stragglers were dumped in Tenderizers and processed. Salvageable Quintessons – '90%ers' – were locked in trucks that dotted the outer rim.

Quintesson officers stood in a celebratory group outside a newly arrived transport vessel. Shielding their eyes against the sun, they surveyed a landscape transformed by their attack. Inside the vessel, Q-319 saluted a monitor screen.

'The Cybertronians' Iaconian base has been secured, General Quantax.'

'Survivors?'

'We found 38 in the salvageable class. They will be sent to Kledji shortly. The majority of injured fell well below accepted resuscitation levels. I have initiated a second sweep.'

'Did any escape?'

'A small number, yes.'

'A small number being...?'

'I cannot say exactly how many, commander. They fled underground.'

'Your victory counts for nothing until every last Cybertronian is accounted for. How many of you remain?'

'80, maybe 90.'

‘Refuel and re-arm. I have received news from one of my more reliable squads that the Autobots’ medical centre is located near your present position. They’ve already cleansed the complex, and in doing so discovered the body of the Matrix Bearer, Rodimus Prime, sealed inside some sort of tomb. They were unable to break in and will soon rejoin you to commandeer pathblasting equipment. Bring me the Matrix, with or without its host.’

‘It shall be in your hands within the hour, General.’

‘I will hold you to that.’

Prowl’s Autobots had congregated in the octagonal foyer at the hub of AMC1, unified by grief. Afraid to talk too loudly and unsure what to say, they huddled against each other and waited for their leader.

Prowl swept through spring-hinged double doors and, surrendering to a statistician’s impulse, counted heads: 197. Everyone was inside. A supernaturally calm Perceptor was leaning over Red Alert to speak to his new chaperone, Kup. Senior officers stood brave-faced and solemn as they received details of the death toll. Prowl squeezed through fissures in the crowd, trying to avoid faces and voices.

‘They left just over a hour ago,’ called Perceptor, beckoning him over. ‘They spent a long time trying to break into the medivault.’

Prowl looked at Red Alert. ‘Did they leave any messages or threats?’

‘Nothing,’ answered Perceptor.

‘I’m sorry you had to go through this, Red Alert. How are you feeling?’

Red Alert shook his head.

‘When will his voxbox be fixed, Kup?’

‘His voxbox? I’ve already fixed it.’

Quark sat down against the corridor wall and put his small hands behind his head. Why had he let Rev-Tone drag him away from the meeting point? They should have been with the others – safety in numbers and all that. Rev-Tone was equal parts stubborn and persuasive, and at times like these it was dangerous combination.

‘Every ward has been checked, Rev. Come on.’

‘Be quiet. You see this?’ Rev-Tone pointed to his own face. ‘This expression means I’m concentrating.’ He jabbed the wall-mounted keypad, which flashed an indignant red.

‘It’s probably just an equipment store.’

‘Highly unlikely considering that we’ve passed several unlocked doors with “Equipment Store” plastered on them. This one’s different: it has a coded lock.’

Quark let his partner tap away. He knew the signs by now. Patronising, evasive, edgy: Rev-Tone was keeping himself busy to avoid thinking about the deaths of his fellow patients. It was a clockwork impulse, and one that he had seen many times since they’d first met in a Decepticon cell at the height of the Straxian Holocaust, two million years previously. Delay the inevitable, relegate the wrenching shock to some occluded corner of the mind, compress it into a Dark Event, out of focus and never to be examined. Let others deal with the repercussions, the rituals of clean up and aftermath.

The keypad flashed green, the door opened and Rev-Tone prodded the darkness with a flick-torch. Something was moving.

A long-dormant optic sensor adjusted to the light. ‘First Aid? Search? Rescue? Is that you?’

‘What did I tell you, Quark? They missed one.’

‘It would help if you didn’t keep shining that torch in my face,’ said Throwback as he was dragged from a sarcophagus of circuitry. ‘I’m getting nasty stim-surges here.’

Rev-Tone and Quark muddled with monitoring equipment that seemed to consist of finger-thick wiring and flashing shoeboxes. Throwback had been dangling from the ceiling in a chandelier of petrolax-drips and nucleon feeds, locked in a cheap bio-suit with only the steady hiccup of his own fuel pump for company.



'I heard the commotion about an hour ago,' he said, 'and the next thing I know Search and Rescue are shorting the lights and locking me in. I was hooked up for one of Perceptor's tests. What happened out there?'

'A Quintesson squad ransacked the place,' said Quark. 'They – hmm. They, er...'

'Murdered everyone,' finished Rev-Tone. 'Except Red Alert. And you.'

'What about First Aid? What about Pipes and Hookjaw and Warpath and Retro and Pipeline and—'

'Let's find Prowl and the others,' said Quark quietly. 'C'mon, Throwback.'

They walked into the foyer and heard raised but muffled voices. Prowl and Kup were silhouetted behind the smoked glass of a consultancy room, throwing exaggerated shapes against the dimpled plexi.

'What's with all the activity?' asked Rev-Tone, flagging down Perceptor. 'We seem to be the only ones not working or arguing.'

'Prowl thinks the Quintessons will come back for Rodimus. He wants to stay put and fight them off.'

'Are you serious? We spent hours fortifying Autobase and look what happened there!'

Kup's voice leapt in volume as he opened the office door and stormed into the foyer:

'We sat and waited last time, Prowl, and half the Resistance were wiped out! When they come back for Rodimus they'll have more men and more firepower – and we'll be sitting here, cowering, having boxed ourselves into a defensive position – again!'

Prowl appeared in the doorway. 'WELL WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE ME DO?!'

Kup stared at Prowl's twisted face, sensed the onlookers and walked away.

Nightbeat pinched the bridge of his nose and used the facial camouflage to study Optimus Prime. Recast in muddied shades of infrared, Optimus seemed distant and half-realised.

'What do we do now?' Nightbeat had innocently asked, tender and hollowed after emptying himself of every secret. He felt strangely de-energised. Three hours with Optimus Prime and he'd mapped out his soul, complete with Places of Interest and a colour-coded key; now it was impossible to fold away, to crease and reseal. How embarrassing; how utterly unlike him. And yet, in a way, he was glad that he had articulated the sadness inside. If anyone should be privy to the roots and nuances of his depression, it should be Optimus Prime.

They'd hardly spoken since the conversational dust had settled. Optimus was trying to break free, rolling his shoulders against the ceiling and scratching at the seams.

A cone of metal fell on Nightbeat's boot, and with it a mote-thick rod of daylight. He looked up to see that Prime's upper body had disappeared through a hole in the ceiling.

'Guess what?' said Optimus. 'There's another hole up here. A big one. Some freak conjunction of wreckage has walled off another space.'

Nightbeat squeezed his shoulders through the ceiling to share the view. It was as if they had burrowed into an aircraft hangar. A dozen shafts of sunlight crossed the void and pooled around their heads.

Moments later the two Autobots were climbing into the outside world. They headed back to the Expressway, treading carefully over ground they now knew to be tenuously thin. Nightbeat balked at the acres of scrap. 'Where do we start?'

'I know what you're thinking, but it's too dangerous. They could be buried anywhere, and the surface layer is too unstable. Besides, the three of them were running out of the tunnel when it collapsed – they may have been retrieved by the Quintessons.'

'Wonderful. So they're either dead or buried alive.'

Optimus scanned a horizon that was fenced in by tower blocks, coolant 'scrapers, habitation domes and the municipal execution chamber (a Straxian relic). 'Standing here is achieving nothing. Iacon is still that way, yes?'

'Yes... we haven't changed the geography too much in four million years.'

'No, it's just – at this time of day the moons should be over there.' He shook away the thought. 'Anyway, if we cut through the Testex Quadrant we can reach Iacon in a matter of hours.'

'I dunno, Prime. The Quintesson back there said Autobase was in ruins. Lying or not, it's not worth the risk. I don't want to rush into occupied territory.'

'If not Autobase, then where?'

'We have another base in the Sonic Canyons. It's far away but it's our safest bet. We can always radio Prowl from there.' He waited for a nod and transformed. 'We'll stay off the Scud Run and avoid any more Quintessons. Just follow me.'

He had waited. Taken back to his old cell, hoisted up and hammered against the wall, held in place by the same old manacles and bonds, Galvatron had waited for the guards to go and the bars to blur and the sickness to subside. And then, with a slight downturn of the head, he had mentally activated the trans-trigger, the switch that would prod the morphcore and send complex instructions to a body-wide network of adaptive circuitry. This would kick-start the transformation program itself, and 8,964 moving parts would nod and twitch and interact, swapping places, re-anchoring, changing size and shape. The whole process would be over in little less than 1.3 seconds.

Anyway: he had mentally activated the trans-trigger... and nothing had happened. Nothing except a nervous jolt of electricity, like a warning sign inside his brain. He tried again and got the same response. Third attempt. Fourth. Fifth, sixth, seventh... He didn't know why now should be any different to the dozens of failed attempts he'd made back in the torture room, but he'd hoped to somehow overcome the Inhibitor Chip by force of will alone. Frustrated and afraid, he had worked himself into a bouncing ball of circuitry, determined to break the cycle, to force a different response.

Soon, his every nervecircuit was scrubbed and frayed. Sensing the currents of his mind churn and boil, sensing encroaching neurological meltdown, he repeated his own name, threading the letters around his neck, bleeding his fever phonetically. Memories from two lifetimes (and maybe more, for who can say that parallel selves are mnemonically independent? Who can say that 20 years of cross-phasing and body-swapping and clone-killing does not blur the boundaries between the 'phasers, the 'swappers, the 'killers?) were meshed into a sprawling retrospective. Previous summits of pain – his mindmerge with Straxus, his dismemberment on Hydrus 4, his transfiguration before Unicron – were instantly peaked. Even his ascension into the Rift, when he was peeled and stripped and deconstructed, when he was rendered irreducible by the howling force of time – even this paled against the blood-rush of agony he felt now.

'Galvatron! Galvatron!'

He did not know when (or why) he'd started to shout his own name. He imagined it being yelled back at him by baying crowds in stadia like Jekka or Xerxes, just like the good old days. The words became abstract bolts of sound. Buried in the slope of his neck and was Point Zero: the origin of the pain, a seething core that infected every pore and fibrous sinew.

His limbs felt different, as if they had been dissected and reassembled incorrectly, as if a handful of joint-pins and motion-bolts had rolled off the table and been forgotten. Internal checks and self-help tests had reported structural weaknesses, slow reaction times, loss of balance, corrupted depth perception, lethargy, neuralgia – not to mention the complete loss of morphcore access. The Inhibitor Chip – the IC, the Inhib, the Chipper – had barricaded throughways and filters.

He would not be beaten by it.

'GALVATRON!'

He sprung away from the wall and transformed. Lost in a mist of shattered manacles, he remoulded himself into a barrel-less laser tripod and skidded across the cell. Afraid to move, afraid to recognise his triumph, he lay in the shadows until the pain – and by the Celestial Spires, by Iacon's Golden Dome, by the Prime Program itself, there was pain – had settled. He activated the trans-trigger... and morphed into robot mode. He rubbed his neck, looking for an entry wound, but the injection had left no mark. The chip was unreachable; he could not tell whether it was still twitching with life or whether it was now a dried black scab floating through his neural byways, but at least he was free from its influence. He could think of only one reason for his ability to defy the Inhibitor Chip: his creation at the hands of Unicron. The Chaos Bringer had changed more than outward appearance; he had introduced some fiery rogue element into his sparkline, into his *genus mechanica*, that made his Vorcode that much harder to crack.

Nevertheless, the Inhib was a formidable weapon, a portable poison from which, it would appear, he alone was immune. Out of Quintesson hands and into his, it would spearhead a new dark age of mechanical warfare. He would use it differently from Xenon, of course. He would inject Autobots as they transformed, paralysing them halfway between humanoid and vehicular forms. He imagined them hanging from meat

hooks in Decepticon torture chambers, their lubricant dripping into plug-holes, a bored but ceaseless scream coming from some snatch of open metal, some valve or slat that used to be a mouth.

He stored the idea at the back of his mind and turned to more pressing concerns. The cell bars were still bright with volt-surge. Though they begged to be touched, he knew that the softest caress would send billions of volts into his body.

Inhib override or no, he was still trapped.

He wondered what the Quintessons had done to his planet in his absence. They may have fallen in their thousands across Polyhexian fields and been swept away by tides of their own moulding lubricant; they may have bagged and brutalised the indigenous population, brought peace to Cybertron and declared Iacon – or Quintonia, or Xeniad, or whatever new name rolled off their forked tongues – a galactic centre for free trade. Maybe, just maybe, the main fleets had yet to breach Cybertronian airspace and there was still time to warn Soundwave and Sixshot. Whatever the current situation, he would break free, scrape Xenon's brain apart circuit by circuit, return home... and undo everything.

Xenon opened the vault door and stepped inside.

What he saw was, in his mind, more breathtaking than star-birth, more humbling than a lame sun or a suicidal moon. To him, it was greater than the Seeding – greater than the Harvest, even. Forget the Old Texts: he would write the New. He would write psalms and canticles describing the wisdom that had made all this possible, and his words would eclipse the Books of Planetfall, Colonisation, Rebellion and Relinquishment, with their 'apocryphal' tales of *sentio metallico*, birthfields, chrono-euclidae and planetary stewardship.

He climbed onto a circular platform and greased the temperature-controlled, bacteria-free air with his tentacles. Down here, buried deep in their complex, he could watch over the Cargo, his genius and foresight made tangible. Languishing in orbit was Thermopylae, the largest spacecruiser in Quintesson history (larger, he believed, than the Colonia, the transport ship that had spirited the Progenitors away all those years ago). The undersea base was being stripped in preparation for the move to Cybertron, and Thermopylae was slowly being filled with doctors, engineers, tech-heads and soldiers. The Cargo would be last to leave.

An internal message interrupted his daydreaming, 'What is it?' he snapped, looking into the comms screen unfolding from his chest. The sight of Haxian and the mundane laboratory backdrop reminded him that his dreams were not yet realised.

'Sorry to interrupt, my Lord, but I have news.'

'You've completed the scan study?'

'Yes, but please bear in mind that this is only a rudimentary scan. Serious assimilation could take decades. I have, however, isolated several major abnormalities in Galvatron's musculature that can be easily replicated. The bio-engineers will make mass adjustments to the prime template. There is other news: Ryknia, Jolup and Sevax have now injected all prisoners and report a 100% success rate – none of them can transform. They've requested a sample of *aqua fortis* so as to explore more experimental avenues.'

'Tell them they will have to return my teleport trooper before I send more supplies.'

'They politely request that you send another trooper: the telearmour in their custody has yet to recharge.'

'Oh, very well. Any news from my generals?'

'General Quantax believes that he has pinpointed the Matrix—'

'Excellent!'

'—and reports that the Autobots were defeated in battle. Survivors are being shipped to Kledji as we speak.'

'Quantax has done well.'

'He also believes it is time to make the announcement.'

'I agree. Make the necessary arrangements. Is there any word from Rodern?'

'No. I have been unable to contact the Enslaver – it's possible that the ship is still in hyperspace.'

'It is dangerous to speculate. Keep trying. Xenon out.'

He leant against the railings with rigid tendrils. Rodern was a loose end. Until he was accounted for – preferably with confirmation that the Autobots on Earth were dead – the delicate fabric of his masterplan threatened to unravel.

The convict ship shuttled noiselessly above the skyline. Soaked in lighter fuel and engine grease, it keeled and freewheeled between hab-blocks and tenements, between spacescrapers and listless orbital domes.

This area of Cybertron – this wedge of cold, contested halfway-space between ground zero and the mesosphere – was as deserted as every other population-pocket and sub-settlement. Up here, things were always passing through, never stopping. Sunrise brought the whiplash thermals, the detonation echoes that ran rings around the planet: the legacy of a thousand shatter-bombs and dry-nukes. Sunset, and banks of sweet-smelling petrolene would rise from the twitching turf and cling to the air like bubblegum.

Like everything else on Cybertron, it hadn't always been like this. 50,000 years ago, Decepticon spy-copters and sky-cycles patrolled empty fuel tubes and monorails. 500,000 years ago the hab-blocks hid the odd Neutralist bolthole or doss-den, maybe a sniper's crash-pad (abandoned but lived-in: a tripod, some stone-cold energon clips, a spiral of used and unused bullets). Five million years ago and the skyways would have teemed with people-pods and skuttlers, hopper-jets and beam-trains; Autobots on hover mats in front of tilting holoscreens or free-floating auditoriums; a civilisation climbing towards the stars, rung by rung, storey by storey. Ten million years ago, the land would have been staked out and smoothed over, with bands of Autobot settlers building bubble shelters and huge solar panels. Sixty million years ago – well, no one knew what Cybertron was like sixty million years ago. It was pre-Prima, pre-Primon, pre-*Primus*. It was, therefore, unthinkable.

Now though, on 26 December 2012, the convict ship was passing through just another stretch of no-'bot's land, another extension of Cybertron's surface emptiness. The streets were deserted. Even the Empties – the few who had escaped grading – had abandoned their usual shambling routes and found new places to hide.

The ship was crammed with people. Two benches created a narrow aisle from the embarkation hatch to the walled-off cockpit. The yellowed windows on each side looked like nicotine-stained fingernails. Autobots and Decepticons stood or sat in silence, staring at anything but each other. Their faces were illuminated by the gummy glow of a hundred energon bonds. The sole propulsion engine struck a doleful rhythm beneath their feet and reminded them that they were on a journey – that this dingy, airless room was moving towards Kledji, and god knows what.

Sunstreaker, Hoist and Grapple were huddled in the corner, their arms and legs strung together by one heavyweight electro-chain. Sunstreaker, who was hunched up against the windowpane, had spent most of the journey studying his own reflection – the drained blue of his optics, the scribble of cuts and scratches on his cheeks. They'd crossed half of Cybertron, but only a few sights had interrupted this baleful self-study: the flickering carcass of Darkmount, the glimpse of the pentagonal Quintesson stronghold on the horizon (looking, somehow, as if it were the oldest thing on the planet), the fleet of hoverbikes and Tenderisers moving across the Miniem Plaza. Little things caught his eye too: a Decepticon with one arm throwing himself off Nova Point; a Sharkticon standing over a dead body, his face buried in his hands; Viroids being chased across the Grease Pits, wires dangling from their mouths like spaghetti. He saw everything from a distance, and it reminded him of his time as a gladiator in the State Games. You would have one chance in the arena, one opportunity to fight, and then – if defeated – you would return to the viewing gallery to watch the action unfold below, helpless to intervene.

He was no longer in the game. A few hours ago he had been in the thick of things, side-by-side with Optimus, ready to plan the first stages of a counterattack – but not now. All he could do now was look at an occupied planet and wish he were still free.

Down below, he saw a Quintesson squad emerge from a frontier building. They were using their rifle butts to knock a couple of Mecannibals towards a portable recycling pit.

And all this was real; all this was actually happening.

The Quintessons had taken over Cybertron.

'Oh Primus,' he said quietly, 'Just let it stop.'

‘Aw, is the Autobot scared?’ said Motormaster from the opposite bench. ‘Do you want the driver to stop and let you off?’

A few Decepticons laughed; a lot more didn’t.

Sunstreaker aimed a punch at the Stunticon’s head but his fist was stopped short by the electro-chain. ‘It’s not even worth telling you to shut up. I expect you’ll be the first to break. You’ll probably leave a patch of oil on your seat when you strand up. You’ll break.’

‘Be quiet, Sunstreaker. No one’s going to “break”.’

‘Oh yeah, Darkwing? We’re going to an execution camp, not a recreation centre. We’re all going to die.’

‘Then why don’t they just kill us now?’ asked Dreadwind. ‘I’d rather be dead than go through this.’

‘Whatever you do,’ warned Runabout, squashed by his side, ‘don’t self-destruct. Anyone who wants out let me know: I’ll beat you to death.’

‘What’s the score with the Decepticons, Darkwing?’

Darkwing arched his head to find his questioner, who was sitting in shadow near the back. ‘What did you say, Rainslam?’

The Autobot leant into a shaft of sunlight. ‘It’s Slamdance, actually. Rainslam is one of my component parts: Rainslam and Grandlam.’

‘Who the hell cares?’ shrieked Spooler. ‘You’re an Autobot: names aren’t important.’

‘You’re just sore because he’s an upgrade,’ shouted Sunstreaker. ‘I bet you’d love to be one of a combining cassette team, except no one would be your partner. Imagine hooking up with you... I’d rather dip my head in the Smelting Pool.’

‘Sunstreaker. Spooler. We’re on our way to a Quintesson abattoir. Now is not the time for feeble provocation.’ Darkwing once more picked Slamdance out of the crowd. ‘What did you ask me?’

‘I asked what the score was. What’s happening with the Decepticons?’

Darkwing received a few warning glances from his team mates but replied nonetheless. ‘Darkmount was blitzed by an entire fleet. We lost. Simple as that. The Quintessons turned their warcruiser into a headquarters and rounded up the survivors.’ He looked around at Motormaster, Spooler, Runabout and the others. ‘We made a run for it but were caught near the Detention Centre. Is that what you wanted to know?’

‘Galvatron’s dead, Soundwave’s dead...’ Dreadwind wrung his hands. ‘Everyone’s dead.’

‘What about you?’ asked Darkwing.

Slamdance shrugged. ‘Autobase was blitzed too. Half of us split, half of us stayed behind to give cover.’ He tapped the window. ‘There’s another ship full of Autobots on our tail... Hey, are we slowing down?’

The sprawling decay of the inner cities had been replaced by the mute beauty of the Manganese Mountain range, flumes and expressways giving way to slopes that were wet with reflection, with light-bend and bounce-back. The ship slipped through the air with the grace and languor of a hot air balloon. The pilot’s voice was piped into the trunk: settle down or be killed on landing.

The next few breems blurred into a hi-tech, hi-speed nightmare. Sunstreaker found himself concentrating on Darkwing’s back as they marched in single file across the windswept plateau outside Kledji. At some point – before they were inside – Motormaster self-destructed.

They were stripped of inessential bodywork, dunked and sprayed, clamped to a chair and given an injection. Then they were led through infinite light-starved walkways to their cells, where they tried to transform – a gut reaction, a life-bred impulse.

Only then did they realise what had been taken from them.

December 27, 2012.

A throbbing cluster of metal bolted away from the Quintessons’ Polyhexian headquarters, whining as the pressure built inside. Release catches were jettisoned like empty energon canisters, breakaway lines ran from top to toe, and the object split into separate holo-probes. Squat-thrusters choked on fag-ash flame and the sub-orbital satellites spun across Cybertron like scattered pollen.

On Aquaria, Xenon watched his technicians set up the final sub-space camera then waved them away and waited for the light-kick, the quick-flash. With an implosive rush, the visual encoders cross-beamed his body, mapping and recording, feeding vampirically off every curve and contour, every tapered plane.

‘Ready to transmit,’ called Haxian.

Xenon spread his tentacles with a peacock flourish, selected his most intimidating face, and looked into the lens.

‘Lower the gun, Wheeljack,’ muttered Sygnet, wondering whether it was too dangerous to brush it aside. ‘Let’s not be rash.’

Wheeljack held the crosshairs over the distant satellite. ‘It’s not Cybertronian, I know that.’

Centurion reached for Mainframe’s shoulder. ‘Well then what—’

‘Don’t ask, because I don’t know.’

‘Something’s happening,’ said Wheeljack, his gun-sight tight in the alcove of his eye. The UFO was leaking. Hologramatic pastel gas oozed from microlite webbing and condensed into a colossal pseudo-solid; a five-sided head that hung over the Terbium Plains with the grace and delicacy of a floating mountain.

The hologram’s voice was calm and assured, yet loud enough the skim layers off the firmament:

*‘This message is dedicated to every Cybertronian who is free to hear it, every Cybertronian who has not yet been found and held and crushed and killed. All you Autobots, all you Decepticons – what silly little names you have given yourselves over the years. I make no distinction between red badge and purple badge. I care little who did what to whom and why – as if there ever really was a reason why. Children of Primus? Ha! If only it were that simple. You are a nation of thieves, a nation of ingrates and backstabbers. You walk across this world as if you own it.’*

‘Who the hell is that?’ asked Mainframe.

*‘I am Xenon, fifth Imperial Majestrix of the revised Quintesson hierarchy, direct bioline descendent of the Progenitors and heir to the Lifecode. Stare at my five faces – I want them carved across your optic nerves. Let the sight of your oppressors take up space in your heads, let it monopolise your mem-files and ancient CPUs. Perhaps, deep down, we are already there.’*

Sixshot worked the stale silo air with restless fingers. Somewhere outside, a whirring spycam stole pictures of the creature that had materialised above Helex.

*‘I want every one of you sub-sentient cast-offs to wallow in the alcoholic magnitude of this event; let it stun your cerebellum as it has done mine. Four years ago, thanks to a Rift you helped create, our planet was threatened.’*

Sixshot thought of his troops barricaded below, locked inside not by bolts and bars but by his own meticulous lies, his web of misinformation. How much longer could he keep them there? How much longer could he disguise his cowardice as tactical savvy?

*‘We attacked you, eager to colonise Cybertron. We were desperate. We were rash. Four million years of warfare had taught you how to kill, however, and we were no match.’*

‘There you go, Optimus,’ said Nightbeat, waving his hand at the monstrous apparition in the air about Kalis. ‘The Imperial Majestrix himself is filling in the gaps for you.’

*‘We dissolved into space, broken and scattered, and you were content to count us as another fallen adversary. But I gathered the ashes of our race and vowed to re-ignite the Quintesson flame. We laid low and grew in strength. Four years of preparation – I would gladly have spent four million to guarantee this outcome.’*

Sevax clapped his hands. ‘This is excellent! A little overblown perhaps – a little clichéd – but stirring stuff nonetheless.’

‘Congratulations,’ said Ryknia, watching the hologram fire reflections off the mountain slopes. ‘You’ve finally found someone more melodramatic than yourself.’

*‘Hidden from sight, we mapped the mechanics of our revenge, ready to—’*

“‘Mapped the mechanics of our revenge’? Oh, please. This is embarrassing.’

‘Shut up, Ryknia.’

*‘—would be ours again. In one fell swoop we crushed the Autobots on Earth. A parallel blitz reduced the Decepticon army to a handful of shell-shocked, brain-dead casualties of war.’*

‘Are the “casualties of war” getting this, Jolup?’ called Ryknia.

Jolup dragged an electro-baton across a vortex of cells, smiling against the blizzard of sparks. ‘Loud and clear, Ryknia, loud and clear.’

Xenon’s voice tore through the Sonic Canyons, amplified as it bounced off every ridge and precipice.

*‘Now the real task begins. You will be recast as construction droids, low-grade automatons, test subjects, race slaves, sluggers and spade-workers: an ex-nation of drooling techno-dross. Those who do not reach even this pitiful standard shall be used as raw material. You will become a girder or a vending machine, a think-bomb or an AI missile. Everyone will be used. Nothing shall be wasted.’*

Siren stood outside Delphi, his dampened audios accustomed to the noise. Iacon, Earth, Polyhex – he’d left it too late. Despatching Slamdance was not enough. What to do now?

*‘As I speak, my men are slowly combing the planet. They will sweep through every bombshell town, every flash-flamed city-state – and they will do so until they have found you all. Surrender to the Great Purge, the Global Shutdown – this is our time.’*

*‘You “Cybertronians”, with your silly names, your silly badges – what have you done to this world? We will rehabilitate; we will burn the diseased flesh and start anew. The Manganese Mountain Range will be ground to dust. The Rust Sea will be evaporated in a haze of regenerative fury. Because this, Seedlings, is the Antiholocaust.’*

*‘Today we return.’*

*‘Today we retake.’*

*‘Cybertron no longer exists – in its place is New Quintyxia!’*

‘There’s no limit on how complicated things can get,  
on account of one thing always leading to another.’

**E B White**

‘In our view, this is not so much a disparity in the texts as a coded warning. Unicron’s attack in 9th Cycle 1578 [1991] was just the beginning. We strongly suspect that a second attack is imminent. It would be difficult – and potentially blasphemous – to give you a date with any certainty, as we are still trying to unpack the intricacies of the Primal Prophecies, but in the interests of protecting the sparkline we recommend you prepare yourself for another clash in 3<sup>rd</sup> Cycle 1651 or 1655 [2005/6].’

**Conclusion to a report by the First Church  
commissioned by Optimus Prime in 1992**

‘Empire only.’

**Sign outside Maccadam’s Oil House,  
circa 3.5 million years BC**



'Death's Head Mission Log 535, verbal entry:

'Day two of our journey through hyperspace, and boredom assumes ever more agonising shapes. We've been speeding through this macro-galactic wasteland for 60 hours now, and each one seems twice as long as the last. Seems we snagged something important when we broke through Autobot City. Magnus says we're travelling at demi- rather than hyper-lightspeed, i.e. only a few degrees above shuttle speed. We're still cruising on a slight warp-curve, too – the ship's hugging the folds instead of hopping from crest to crest. Might've been better to skip h-space altogether, you know? Too late now. Too dangerous to fight the current, apparently, so stuck here for the duration.

'And I know these robots have techno-babble for every occasion, but "temporal fatigue"? The Autobot surgeon Ratcatch (cross-ref log 418... searching for ident details... match: Ratchet) says that prolonged hyperspatial jaunts – "sleepovers" – can warp time perception by corrupting the neuronet on a synaptic level. Inexperienced travellers complain of slow-motion conversations, where it takes a month to say good morning. I call it boredom, yes?

'Hard to say whether we're moving at an incredible speed or standing dead still. Wouldn't be surprised if it were the latter, though, considering what this ship's been through. Ramraiding its way through half a mile of heat-compressed groundmass and side-slicing through orbit would've reduced my old ship to cinders, right?

'I'm in surprisingly good shape too. Internal repairs have worked overtime to spruce up the old endo-skeleton. Thought my tumble off that balcony in Aquaria would've done more lasting damage. Underestimate myself sometimes, eh?

'I've spent most of the last two days in voluntary isolation. Not exactly executive suite, but suppose my comfort isn't the Autobots' top priority at the moment, what with their Earthen HQ blown to pieces, half their number dead and the near-certainty that their homeworld has been overrun. Still, we've all had bad days, right?

'Done my best to keep out of people's way: a lot of them still hold grudges after that Unicron business. Giving them the co-ordinates of the Quintessons' base of operations not enough, eh? Have to apologise for past aggressive behaviour. Hah. I'd betray the lot of them at a moment's notice. If the Quintessons offered me a single Shanix more than Magnus I'd happily swap sides (security check // level nine // primed for post-dictation encryption). Gotta be careful.

'Least I've been honest with Magnus. He alone sees the bigger picture, tries to keep his men under control. I've told him all I know about the Quints – deal's a deal, yes? He's not yet made an official announcement to the troops. Perhaps he's biding his time, allowing them to adjust to the loss of their teammates. One of those touchy-feely leaders, I guess. Grief, loss, depression, regret – alien concepts to me... unless I'm overdrawn. Can't help wondering whether he'll take me to Aquaria after we visit Cybertron. Won't get paid until information is validated, so I'll probably have to tag along. If the Quintesson threat proves too great, I'll split.

'In case I replay this report at a later date, must point out that the background noise is down to the Autobots, not internal feedback. They've been modifying the bridge and outlying passageways to make an open-plan medical bay. Anything that isn't bolted down gets turned into torsal slabs, stretchers, body-

frames. Very enterprising. Ratchet's been working non-stop since we left Earth, rushing from patient to patient with a fist full of scalpels. Hasn't even treated his own wounds yet. Idiot.

'Each time I poke my head into the corridor I see another Autobot being dragged into cold storage. Don't think the word "morgue" exists in the Autobot vernacular. Even put their DOAs into stasis, yes? Least it keeps the corridors clean – hate to wade through Skivs and Leakers next time I one more centimetre and I'll put your face through the back of your head, yes?'

Rewind raised his arms and moved his lips away from the barrel of Death's Head's shotgun. 'Wait! I wasn't going to—'

'Wasn't going to what? Put a bullet in my head? Stupid, trying to creep up on me like that!' Death's Head retracted the microphone into his thumb. 'How long have you been eavesdropping?'

'I've only just arrived – I swear it! Ultra Magnus wants you on the bridge. He has an announcement to make.'

'Is this a summons?'

'No. It's an invitation.'

'In which case, lead the way.'

They walked through upper decks that writhed with dark perfumes – the sandalwood stench of a sparking scalpel, the whiskey-sniff of petrolax on a hot floor. Death's Head watched lavender smoke somersault away from freshly soldered steel. The floors and walls (and ceilings... he didn't know how, but yes: the ceilings) were covered with thrown oil, with the stuff that got away: the salty, slippery lube-juice that popped from severed tubes and leapt from the nozzle, the body fluids that tricked the stitch, the stem, the reseal. His cloak drew oil from the injured as it dredged their wounds. Their faces blurred as the pain took hold – and once the pain took hold, the pain would not let go. Autobots he thought had died in battle were tent-pegged to circuit slabs and stripped to ticking clockwork trunks, to *base mechanica*, their life-force reduced to an ever-weaker twitch of the head.

And four corridors away one robot with one pair of hands worked his way through 40 casualties.

Death's Head said nothing as he slid past Ratchet. The surgeon was digging deep into Springer's Swiss-cheesed chest, pulling out industrial steroid filters and engex patches the size of car tyres.

After Ratchet the deck became more ordered, with convalescent Autobots propped up against chairs or walls. They stared into space as if watching something unpleasant. Evidence of Ratchet's failure was quietly removed: Carnivac and Skids carried cadavers to the upper deck, where they would be arranged behind tinted glass, away from prying eyes and sticky fingers.

The bridge had been transformed from a spacious and functional cockpit into something resembling a softly lit living room. Autobots sat in groups and talked in whispers, careful not to mention the obvious – everyone felt guilty for surviving the slaughter.

Seaspray dismantled his forearm to locate a nagging wound while Beachcomber talked and talked and talked. The surviving Throttlebots studied a theoretic map of hyperspace, acutely aware that dropping their collectively feigned interest would force them to discuss Wideload.

Mirage, Hound, Bluestreak and Trailbreaker huddled in the corner like conspirators, warming their faces on console-glow and screen heat.

'It's not your fault,' said Hound half-heartedly.

'I know it's not,' Mirage replied. 'I'm not blaming myself for anything. I just think Magnus could have done without the city inspection. The Quintesson invasion sort of puts things into perspective. I was insensitive.'

'Yes,' said Bluestreak. 'Yes, you were. But this is hardly the time for self-criticism.'

They looked up as Death's Head walked into the room. At the same time Ultra Magnus said, 'Autobots. Your attention please.'

'Here we go,' said Mirage, stiffening.

'Autobots, please – a moment's silence. Thank you.' Magnus lowered his hands. 'Firstly, I apologise for the delay in addressing you. I wanted to assess our situation and give you facts, not conjecture. That said, I still cannot tell you why the Quintessons attacked, even if a motive – no matter how twisted – would make things easier to accept. All I can say is that the nature of their attack recalls an earlier, less successful invasion in 2008.'

'Last time they launched parallel invasions,' called Rewind from the floor. 'Cybertron and Earth were attacked simultaneously.'

'Which is why we're heading for Cybertron. There's a possibility that the Quintessons have yet to invade.' Whoever scoffed covered their mouth before Magnus could look their way. 'At the very least we can assist the Autobots on Cybertron. We might tip the balance.'

'Does Prowl know about the invasion?' asked Hound, noting his leader's discomfort and offering a direct question as a lifeline.

'When we last spoke the Quintessons were not mentioned, which is why I believe Earth may have been attacked long before Cybertron.'

'For all your talk of facts,' said Mirage, 'we still don't know the scale of the problem. The Quintessons chasing us right now might be the sum total of their race. As you say, we have no proof of their motives. Revenge? Or a genuine attempt at colonisation?'

'I have someone who can give you the facts.' Ultra Magnus made a small, almost embarrassed gesture towards Death's Head and let the mechanoid take centre stage.

'I'll keep this short, yes? I've heard the Quintessons' plans and witnessed them preparing for an attack. I know what they want.'

'Because you're colluding with them, bounty hunter!' shouted Smokescreen.

'Come here and say that, eh?'

'Stay where you are,' barked Magnus. 'All of you – sit and listen. Death's Head discovered their operation by accident...'

'They've built a deep-sea base on the ocean floor of the planet Aquaria. Nice and remote. They intend to colonise Cybertron and wipe you out. They've been planning this for years. You saw the amount of attack craft they used against you – I've seen ten times that number.'

'Could you please explain to me,' said Mirage scornfully, 'exactly how they intend to colonise Cybertron? Sorry to sound callous, but after the last invasion there aren't too many of them left, are there?'

'I saw thousands of them, Autobot. And sorry to sound callous, but after four million years of pointless fighting, there aren't too many of you Transformers left, either.'

The explosive charge, when he detonated it, reduced the engine casing to a tidy little crater. It destroyed a portion of the comms-systems too, but not to worry: thanks to his wiretap, Q-2709 could still overhear the Autobots' conference on the bridge.

He carried only destroying the Ark's trans-warp engines piece by piece. Every flurry of sparks made him smile; every fizz-fuse and dynamite line left him satisfied. He wondered when Rodern and the others would catch up, and checked that the tracking beacon he'd hidden in the corridor was still broadcasting its persistent little signal, like a buoy pinpointing the Ark's position in the hyperspatial ocean.

Images of an unexpected Quintesson boarding party mingled with vainglorious fantasies of General Rodern giving him an instantaneous promotion (and with it a proper name – none of this rank-sensitive Q-numeral business – you might as have 'Cannon Fodder' written across your back in huge white letters).

He stopped mapping his glorious career when Ultra Magnus's voice returned to his ear. He registered the change of tone and was about to resume his daydream when he realised what was being said. He dropped the wire-cutter and pressed the earpiece deeper. This was too good to be true...

'Magnus is right,' protested Hound, craning to stare down the rowdy Autobot at the back. 'Conserving energy should be our main priority, Snarl. For once in your life pipe down and listen!'

'Voluntary systems shutdown for one day,' repeated Ultra Magnus, flattening random mutters of dissent. 'Cybertron is still a long way off. Sitting around here chatting, no matter how cathartic, is a waste of energy: we need to conserve our strength.'

Beachcomber raised his hand. 'And if the Quintesson warcruiser attacks us in our sleep?'

'The Ark will be running on autopilot while we're offline,' said Silverbolt. 'If anything crosses the perimeter sensors we'll be awakened automatically.'

Ultra Magnus looked at his crew, hoping that this would be the end of the discussion. A few seconds of silence signalled a won argument.

Jolup's shok baton seemed to bruise the air as he dragged it along an endless line of electro-bars. Recoil jabbed his forearm but it was worth it, if only for the looks on the prisoners' faces. Each burst of light picked out another huddle of Cybertronians cowering at the back of their cells, or clawing at the walls, or dangling from manacles. The moans of agony and delirium had ceased – or maybe he was just getting used to them. Only a few prisoners talked, and then only to themselves.

He peered into cell 1220. Two Cybes of indeterminate allegiance sat opposite each other in the darkness, neither daring to look up at him. Were they fit for purpose? He dashed the bars and one of them – the larger one – looked up. Jolup saw that the letter A had been stamped onto his forehead and reluctantly continued his patrol. Shame to turn down a prime specimen, but rules were rules: Grade As could not be taken Downstairs... But even before the thought had settled in his mind, he stopped to reconsider. Sevax and Ryknia were away on business. Would they miss one little Reddie, even if he were a top ranker? He forced himself to start walking. Ryknia would find out: Ryknia always found out. He'd have to root out some Grade Cs – physically and mentally weaker, and therefore easy meat for his little side-project.

(Inside cell 1220, Darkwing turned back to Dreadwind, unaware how close he had come to death.)

Jolup cursed himself for thinking about his teammates. He imagined them racing towards the Polyhexian HQ without out, eager to talk shop with Quantax. In his own way, he was planning ahead just as much as they were, with their battle-plans and rehab strategy. Okay, so maybe he wasn't debating how best to re-establish intergalactic links after four million years of trade embargoes, economic sanctions and blacklisting; maybe he wasn't deciding who should be sent on diplomatic missions to neighbouring planets to negotiate reparations, loans and industrial subsidies; maybe he wasn't arguing about reciprocal agreements and peace treaties. Let the patriots and peacemakers handle Phase Three.

He could think of nothing worse than sitting in a boardroom opposite Quantax and a vid-linked Xenon discussing how New Quintyxia should be mapped out and carved up. He could picture the four of them now, hunched over a holo-map, happily drawing up the new borders (or trying to find the old ones), positioning principalities, trade centres, spaceports, smelting pools, factories, hospitals, download centres. All very worthy, but of little interest. What was more satisfying: fine-tuning a brave new world or strutting around a concentration camp torturing Reddies? Drafting the provisions of the new welfare system or making prisoners go blind with pain? There was no contest.

He peered into cell 1227, where a thin-limbed Cybe was shaking. His head was buried between his knees as if he was trying to be sick, and his optical filters were overheating; it looked as if his eyes were on fire.

'Whatever is the matter?' asked Jolup.

The robot shook until his butchered little frame almost fell apart. His entire head was vibrating, as if every part of his face wanted to be elsewhere: he had ten cheekbones, twenty eyes, an elasticised mouth and a set a mould-lines that splintered every patch of facial space. In his mind he was screaming one simple command, one mythical set of digits no longer than a bio-code, and he was screaming it over and over and over...

'Of course!' Jolup shrieked. 'You're trying to self-destruct! Wow, my first suicide!'

The robot abandoned the idea as impossible. His neural network simply refused to co-operate, and instead of blissful oblivion, instead of instantaneous absorption into the Matrix – nothing. Was he doing it right? Admittedly, he'd never seen anyone initiate Self-directed Terminal Closedown before. Okay, so Autobots and Decepticons self-destructed all the time, but a lot of cheating went on: you could bet your life that nine times out of ten those wrist-slitters and body-bombers were using contingency codes to ensure that their brain module escaped unscathed; it was the robotic equivalent of ringing an ambulance before you necked the pills.

STC was supposed to be different. Quote the suicide code in your head and that was it: absolute shutdown. An electromagnetic pulse would wipe your memfiles and purge your neuronet, and then the bullet of pure energon in the centre of your brain would be detonated. The only telltale signs would be a thin wisp of bluish smoke rising from the mouth and the optic gutters. That said, he'd never seen anyone go all the way and initiate STC. Perhaps – and it was a terrible, blasphemous thought – but perhaps the Keeper and his theo-scribes were wrong. Perhaps the Primal Pentateuch itself was wrong. Perhaps there was

no pan-generational, built-in kill-switch. Perhaps Primus *hadn't* encrypted a vengeful technogenetic deathcode into the loops and spirals of every Transformer's cybernetic make-up...

No. If the Pentateuch was wrong, it meant that the Old Texts were right. And the Old Texts were not right. They were not right.

His head hurt as he thought back to his local download theatre, where the Circuitmasters had cited STC as irrefutable evidence that Primus was real, that he was not just a starry-eyed creation myth. True, Autobot scientists had spent millennia trying, in vain, to pinpoint the trigger switch, but then they were still trying to unravel the mysteries of biomorphic reproduction and the Eugenesis Code. Besides, *everyone* knew the STC sequence itself: 4/11.002983712. How was such data known collectively unless the same Creator had pulled them all, one by one, from the bubbling planetary surface?

'It's no use trying,' said Jolup. 'The Inhibitor Chip disarms all extraneous neural codes. Actually, I'm surprised that you can even open your mouth.' He watched the robot shudder to a standstill. 'The easy way out isn't as easy anymore, you feckless Reddie scum. There is no final solution in here. You'll do as we say. Your lives are measured and determined according to our wishes. Look at me.'

The robot looked at him.

'You! I know you! You're that Autobot spy! The one who hid on Quintesson all those years! You were there 'til the end, dodging our patrols and sabotaging the Canister operations. Wow.' He leant closer, careful not to touch the bars. 'It *is* you. You used to talk a lot more, Autobot. You had that stupid little sing-song voice. Go on – say something funny. Say something that *rhymes*.'

Wheelie looked away. He knew the Quintessons better than any other Transformer, having camped out on their home planet for so long. He'd studied their culture, their customs and practices, their rites and rituals, even some of the Old Texts (in fact his syntax-sequencer had only become corrupted when he read the last line; Ratchet said it was pure coincidence). Even so, his knowledge was sketchy. He knew their preferred kill-method (decapitation) but not their post-death theosophy; he knew their lifespan (seventy million years before circuitburn) but not their origins; he knew the name of their ancestors (the Progenitors) but not what became of them. In fact, the only area of the Quintesson lifestyle he knew inside and out was their torture methods, their predilection for taking things apart and prodding the cogs. He'd known from the moment he'd stepped into Kledji that he would never endure Quintesson torture.

He looked Jolup in the eye with uncharacteristic resolve. Why had this Decepticon defected? And why was he smiling?

Jolup was staring at Wheelie's bulbous scalp. Etched into tacky crimson paint, as bold and striking as a bullet wound, was the letter 'D'. He shut down the electro-bars and ushered some guards into the cell. 'He's exactly what I'm looking for. Take him Downstairs.'

Wheelie reached instinctively for his non-existent catapult, mumbling incoherently. He was losing his mind.

Jolup looked down at the robot as he was led to the walkway. 'If he tries to blow himself up, flood him with six million volts and hang him up to dry.' He scraped a thin Decepticon finger across Wheelie's throat. 'Be careful what you wish for, little one.'

It was at this point that Sunstreaker let loose with a barrage of obscenities. His voice was so impassioned, so tightly wound, that his threats melted into a monosyllabic whine. 'You traitorous Decepticon scum! Come over here and I'll rip your head from your frikkin' shoulders!'

'Stop calling me a Decepticon,' Jolup snapped, tapping his shok baton against his palm. 'Appearances can be deceiving.'

'Whatever the hell you are, you're too gutless to take on a robot your own size!'

'The name's Jolup. Joh-lup.'

'Shut down these bars! Let's have it out – you and me!'

Sunstreaker's cellmates, Ramjet and Kickback, hid in the corner, afraid of contracting his madness.

'You've been considerably weakened by the paralysis chip floating around in your neuro-fluids. It really wouldn't be—'

'Fair?!'

'I was going to say "worthwhile".' Jolup sheathed his baton, hooked his thumbs on his waist and leant closer. 'I mean look at you. You're a wreck.'

The insult was too much. Sunstreaker punched the cell wall. Jolup was right: his paintwork was in a horrendous state – all blotchy red – and his torso was as blistered as bark. ‘Look what you’ve done to me! I’m ruined!’

For the second time that day, Jolup’s curiosity was piqued. ‘Ruined?’

‘I’m a sack of scrap metal! An eyesore! A derelict!’

‘If it’s any consolation, you weren’t much to look at in the first place.’

Sunstreaker leapt for Jolup and crashed into the spluttering bars. His body raged with energy, every gap and throughway webbed with lightning. He collapsed, and it felt as if he was melting into the tiles. ‘You hide behind your neat little forcefield and pick on the smaller targets, swinging your stupid little stick. I’ve got your number, Jolup.’

‘Hush, Sunstreaker.’ The voice came from the adjacent cell. Slamdance was manacled to the common wall and craning his neck to speak. ‘Calm down. Relax.’

‘I’m gonna get out of here, Jolup, and I’m gonna hunt you down, and when your back’s turned—’

‘How very noble of you.’

‘—I’m gonna put a sabre through your fuel pump.’

‘Shut up, Sunstreaker.’

‘I’m gonna put you through the worst body-horrors and face-torture you can imagine, gonna make you scream and scream and—’

‘Let it go!’

‘You really should listen to your friend, Reddie.’

‘—scream until you won’t know where or who or what you are! And do you know why I can do this?’

Slamdance gave up.

‘Do you know what gives me the right to do this?’

‘Tell me,’ said Jolup.

Sunstreaker spat a wad of stale oil into Jolup’s face. ‘Because I’m *better* than you. And if you’re really are a Quintesson, we’re *all* better than you, because one of us is worth a thousand of Unicron’s bastard offspring.’

Jolup wasn’t listening. His world had exploded with the sizzling ball of mechwaste that had landed on his cheekbone. He was already beckoning his guards over and firing up his baton. Sunstreaker was scooped up and tied up in seconds. Next door, Slamdance closed his eyes.

‘Downstairs?’ said a guard.

‘Not this one. Take him to my personal quarters. He needs to be taught some manners.’

Prowl felt oddly protected inside First Aid’s otherwise empty office. Smoky panes of glass formed three of the four walls; it looked as if someone had breathed on every surface and written ‘First Aid – Medical Officer’ with a warm fingertip.

He was hunched over the desk like a drunk, cloistered from a world of noisy activity, of action and reaction. Only a handful of his Autobots had been given specific tasks, yet everyone seemed otherwise engaged. He could hear drilling, far away. Kup and others were trying to break into Rodimus Prime’s medi-vault.

What would Kup do once inside? Strap Rodimus to a wheelchair, hook him up to a vat of bubbling energon and push him up and down corridors? Yes, and he’d probably fuse his fingers to the handles to prevent separation. Rodimus was one of many casualties now, each one needing a personal carer, a lifter/carrier to check the electro-pulse and sparkline, but he was the only Matrix Bearer, the only one with a demigod trapped inside his chest.

He was reminded of his last conversation with First Aid (a one-way conversation, since half of it was pre-recorded) in which the doctor had invoked Section 11 – euthanasia dressed up in reg-speak and legalese. First Aid had been concerned that Rodimus was too big a drain on AMC1’s limited resources, and he’d been right. The energy saved by switching Prime off would save the lives of at least a dozen front-liners. With Prime’s chances of recovery dipping below 8%, was it ethically and morally excusable to deny them these resources? Then there was the Matrix itself... First Aid had assured him, more or less, that the Matrix could be surgically removed without setting Unicron free. Assuming that were true, could it still be

used to grant life to the lifeless, to resuscitate the burnouts and shutdowns – people like First Aid himself? Would Unicron’s presence impair or even distort the Matrix’s life-giving properties? Could he take the risk of spreading the Chaos Bringer’s influence?

He wished he knew more about the Matrix, but then he’d been wishing that for millions of years, along with every theoscientist and Circuitmaster. No one knew where the Matrix had come from (although most people thought it had been forged in the Primal Chamber and teleported into Primon’s chest) or what it was made of. On those rare occasions – the majority of them pre-war – when the Matrix Bearer had surrendered his gift for inspection, metallurgists had declared that the material from which it was made was unclassifiable, its molecular structure correspondent with no known metal or mineral. The tech-heads never probed too deeply, though, in case they chipped a facet or put pressure on some invisible mould-line, causing everything to collapse. Atheists used to say that the only thing keeping the Matrix together was faith itself: a race-wide refusal to explore their origins.

He shared the view held by many that the key to unlocking these secrets lay within the Primal Pentateuch, specifically verses 1-36: the Eugenesis code. These lines were believed to be the blueprints of the Transformer race, every tendency and predisposition expressed as a string of digits. Extremists said that the Eugenesis code could even ‘explain’ the Decepticons, but accepting that meant believing in a Primal Plan that created Paradise and its Serpent simultaneously.

Theoscientists also used the 36 lines of program-code as evidence of Intelligent Design, arguing that such insanely complex process-language could only have been written by a member of the Sentient Core. Cybertron’s best computer engineers had spent centuries poring over the scripture but in the end declared the Eugenesis Code painfully abstruse – believers still talked in mortified whispers about the renowned code-breaker Herotese, who went mad and joined a Circuit Sect after spending two hundred thousand years trying to unpack the indecipherable first line. So for the moment, whatever secrets lay underneath the Matrix’s non-classifiable, pseudo-crystalline surface, they remained secrets.

Prowl put Section 11 to the back of his mind, but while he found it easy to forget First Aid’s words, erasing the doctor’s face was more difficult. The message left on his office comm-screen was the last time he had regarded First Aid as a living being (the moment they’d hit the utility ducts he had guessed – he had known – what they would find in AMC1). He wondered whether his office in the Archives Centre had been ransacked. If not, there was the possibility that First Aid was preserved electronically: a tidy file of vid-bytes stacked against a hundred other archived messages. Maybe he could say the same about Thunderclash, Magnus, Sideswipe, Mirage, Ratchet – how many Autobots now only existed as messages on his machine?

There was nothing to do with an old message except play and re-play. There was no way to extrapolate a bio-code from a flickering screen; no way to flood a clone with second-hand personal data (and even that would create a subtly different Vorcode, a branched sparkline: it was never truly the same person). You couldn’t bring them back using thirty seconds of dialogue and a bad picture. And yet they weren’t completely gone – they still existed as a collection of pixels, destined to say the same things in the same way. And it wasn’t just the monitor screen that preserved their memory, either: their every spoken word was retained on sound waves that would bounce and echo for thousands of years. Technology carried them beyond death: the vidcaps and the analogue scraps, the snippets of dialogue on lost wiretap tapes, the retrograde images burnt onto flimsy surveillance film – not to mention the panoply of sound and imagery downloaded through the retnets and audiofilters of everyone who had ever seen them. Their personalities had been encoded in the minds and memory logs of every Autobot and Decepticon with whom they had interacted. Transformers had a voracious appetite for stimuli: they stored everything and forgot nothing: they were walking web-cams, with apertures for eyes and microphones for ears.

Then there was time itself – the ultimate preservationist. Time ensured that they would never truly die because everything that had ever happened to them was still happening to them; their every thought and action was pickled in temporal formaldehyde. Time was not straight and flat: it had an infinite topography that stretched in all directions, forever: everything was simultaneous and coexisting. He had long maintained – and argued with Skids and Perceptor on many occasions – that the concept of temporal linearity had been imposed by sentient beings to stop them going mad. In reality, past/present/future were simultaneous. And so he was sitting at a desk/he was firing at Tridents/he was berating Thunderclash and Rodimus for their childishness – all these things were happening *right now*. He couldn’t remember the future, but all that was happening now too.

All very good in theory. Yet none of it convinced his mortal mind that First Aid and Thunderclash and Ammo and Warpath were anything other than truly, irretrievably dead. You couldn't throw a memory on a circuit slab and flood it with electricity; you couldn't snatch an old sound-bite or screen-grab and use it to resurrect the deceased; you couldn't even go back in time and prevent the killing blow, because a litany of paradoxes stood in your way. Everything was predestined: change the past and an infinity of parallel universes were ready to absorb the revision. But then maybe death had one over on time, because even time would die in the end. When the universe gathered itself up into a seething singularity and willed itself out of existence, time would go with it.

Through the dimpled glass he saw more bodies being hauled into G Ward. It had become known as the Dumping Ground, although Perceptor, overseeing the procedure, would never have called it by that name. He could not discern the carried or the carriers, but dozens of sagging, hammocked corpses were moving past his poor like a procession. How long before AMC1 was clear?

His mind was moist with sweet fatigue. He let it leave its shell and drift around the complex, eyeing proceedings with a voyeuristic detachment. There were Chromdome and Throwback, salvaging equipment from the science labs. A little further down the corridor a pack of grim mid-rankers removed corpses while troopers and scouts foraged for remains among the slabs and upturned gurneys. Getaway, Scattershot and Afterburner continued to reinforce the entrance hatch with a super-compressed mulch of steelant and mechgrit. Generic Autobots filled the backdrop – in his mind, they all looked a little like Kup.

He embellished the fantasy with details, scratching faces onto the faceless and putting words in empty mouths. And although every character had their own voice and every voice had its own grain and timbre, they were all talking about the same thing: him. The criticisms rang crisp and clear in his head. *Why did we lose the Autobase battle?* Prowl. *Why did we flee to the med-centre?* Prowl. *Why are all our friends dead?* Prowl.

Yes, there was definitely an undercurrent of discontent, something sour and restless in the eyes of every Autobot. Rather than confront the issue, he had retreated behind treated glass, locking himself away from the very people he should be leading.

It was Kup's fault. Kup had started the argument. Kup had supplied the ammunition to assassinate his character. The confrontation had taken place in the main foyer, shortly after he had announced the plan to fortify AMC1 in preparation for the Quintessons' return. Kup had pushed through the loosening crowd and launched his verbal assault. 'Weak willed and suicidal', 'ill-conceived', 'preposterously short-sighted' – the accusations had flown thick and fast while 191 Autobots had stopped and stood and stared. Grabbing Kup by the arm and dragging him into the consultation room had postponed if not prevented a very public slanging match.

He'd had time now to think about what Kup had said. He knew his plan to remain in AMC1 was weak and unconvincing, but what was the alternative? Where else was there to hide? They couldn't go back: retracing their steps, they'd come to a halt at the last homemade barricade, one of 40 they'd used to cover their retreat. And they couldn't risk using the Quintessons' route in case they were ambushed. The med-centre, meanwhile, was hopelessly self-contained: stuffed and sealed to prevent the spread of pathogens and micro-bacteria. If they couldn't run any further and they couldn't go back, surely they had no choice but to stand their ground and exploit their sole tactical advantage: impenetrability. He'd tried his best to explain his position from a tactician's perspective: that if all variables lead to the same unpleasant outcome you must ensure that such an outcome is avoided for as long as possible. With characteristic oversimplification Grimlock had called it delaying the inevitable, but the inevitable – Rodimus Prime's death, a Quintesson victory, and the subjugation of their entire race – was something that Kup did not want to accept.

His decision to stay put wasn't 'right' or 'wrong': when stripped of alternatives such terms become redundant. Kup was frustrated and angry, worried sick about his best friend's terminal condition, and he had to take it out on someone. Who better than the 'officious, straight-backed paper-shuffler who cares more about balancing books than saving lives'?

Perhaps he was taking it too personally. Perhaps Kup was exaggerating the mood of discontent. Perhaps the murmurs of rebellion and mutiny were symptomatic of a situation as dark as theirs.

Perhaps.

But perhaps they'd never have been in this mess if Rodimus or Magnus had been in charge.

He stood and turned away from the door, anxious to take his eyes off the endless parade of corpses. He looked at the data charts pinned to the wall: patient lists, treatment updates, cervobiotic breakdowns –



every scrap of information now obsolete. He was gripped by a sudden anger. How dare he shirk responsibility? How dare he assuage his guilt with suppositions and second-guesses? He had to consider the facts of their situation: they were all going to die because of him. All this was his fault. He had insisted on waiting for the Quintessons to make the first move. When they attacked, he had argued to remain in Autobot base and not assist the Decepticons. When they finally turned their attention to Iacon, he'd halved his troops and fled to a dead end. So Kup was right: all this *was* his fault.

His tired eyes found the Death List, relegated to waist level and half-hidden among less arresting documents. It was made up of seven names. Seven names: how hopelessly inaccurate. Something grey and fleeting broke the surface of his mind, something usually anchored in the depths. He imagined his name – his full name, complete with biocode and serial number – typed out as number eight.

How long would the list be now? He couldn't resist totalling and tallying: it was in his nature. He counted a good few hundred left on the battlefield and the three-dozen headless patients piled up in E Ward. Soon the casualties they had brought from Autobot base would die too – he imagined them expiring as he walked the aisles, his name on their lips. There was nothing he could do for those that were already dead, for those countless Autobots he had already forsaken. A fierce determination rose up inside him. There would be no more deaths. He would do everything in his power to save their lives, even if it meant—

What? What could he do?

Determination alone could not save their lives. He was as powerless as he had ever been.

The drilling became louder and more insistent (Kup had obviously recruited more workers). Suddenly Prowl leapt to his feet, opened the door and rushed headlong towards the sound.

He knew what he had to do.

Rev-Tone and Quark ignored the distant drilling. They were a long way from everyone else. After checking F Ward for structural weaknesses they'd sloped off into the outlying passageways, still under construction. Lanterns hung from skinny metal fences that blocked off unstable areas and funnelled the tunnel into a dark dead end. They sat on top of individual pyramids of rubble.

Quark took a handful of grit from his seat and threw it into the darkness. It struck a distant wall with satisfying impact.

'How are you feeling?' he asked after a few minutes of comfortable silence.

'I feel half dead. I can hear and smell and taste the battle. I can picture the Quintessons advancing on all sides. I can recall the faces of everyone that looked away or shook their head as I *begged* them to come with me. I feel guilty for surviving. I feel angry with myself for that guilt. I feel sick.'

Quark leant to pick up more filings (scoop) and sent them flying (chink). 'I was asking about your legs.'

'Oh. Right.' Rev-Tone ran his hands over his thighs, testing the territory. 'Yeah, they're getting better. Thanks.'

'I feel the same as you,' said Quark. 'About the battle.'

(Scoop. Chink.)

'They'll be here soon,' Rev-Tone mumbled, throwing his own handful of grit.

'I know. Frightening, isn't it?'

'Prowl doesn't know what he's doing.'

'He's under a lot of pressure. It can't be easy.'

(Scoop. Chink.)

'He's not the right type, you see. He hasn't got the spark for leadership. At least Rodimus had the spark. Perceptor's too preoccupied with the smaller picture – he wouldn't be suitable – and Chromedome only comes into his own with computers or comms stuff. Kup's going off the rails and Red Alert's too paranoid.'

'Well there's only one person suitable then, isn't there?'

Rev-Tone stopped in mid-throw. 'Me? Well, I mean, I'm just a soldier, and a wounded one at that.' He shifted in his gravel seat. 'And you know how I hate giving orders. Plus I'm universally recognised as the least popular Autobot since Flame. You and Bluestreak are the only ones who like me, and you don't count.'

'Relax. I was only joking.'

'Ah, yes. Nothing like a joke at my expense.' He threw more grit into the darkness (chink). 'Besides, I knew you were joking. It's obvious.'

'If you dare say that my head twitches when I lie...'

'Well it does!'

'I suffer from mis-aligned sensor-fissures in my upper spinal strut, fissures too delicate for even Ratchet to correct. And anyway, I didn't twitch just then.'

(Scoop. Chink.)

'Do you think they'll break through the entrance like last time?'

Rev-Tone shrugged. 'How else would they get in?'

'It's been reinforced with adamantine shielding. They cannibalised most of B Ward.'

'Makes no odds. They'll break in. They'll work their way through whatever we put in their way.'

'So basically what you're saying is that we're dead in the water. That's it. Finished.'

'I'm just being realistic.'

(Scoop. Chink.)

(Scoop. Chink.)

'Rev-Tone?'

'Hm?'

'If we're going to die – I mean if we're going to die *here*, soon – then at least we're going down together. As it should be, you know? These last two million years have been a pleasure. A pleasure and a privilege.'

'You make it sound very formal.'

'What I'm trying to say is... oh, I don't know.'

'Stop being so... icky. You're making me feel queasy.' Rev-Tone stood up. 'Shall we rejoin the party?'

(Scoop. Chink.)

'Rejoin the party? Is that supposed to be funny?'

'I was being sarcastic.'

'But even then, this isn't the time for—'

'Oh, calm down.' (Scoop.) 'Don't get all twitchy.'

'I can't believe you just said that!'

'Shhh! Quiet. Listen.'

Quark balanced a heap of gravel on his palm. 'What? What is it?'

Rev-Tone nodded at Quark's hand. 'Throw it. I'm serious. Throw it down the tunnel.'

Quark threw. There was no impact, no sound.

They peered into the darkness, amazed at what they saw.

Midday on New Quintyxia, and the sky was vexed with vapour trails as Ryknia and Sevax left Polyhex.

'It's not often that I envy Jolup,' muttered Ryknia over a frictionless intercom, 'but he had the right idea staying behind. 13 hours of backslapping and self-congratulation. When Quantax tabled the kill-stats and started talking us through each squad ratio I was ready to put a bullet through my head.'

'You bore too easily,' said Sevax. 'If you'd stopped staring into space and actually listened you'd have learnt something about Phase Three. Our work isn't over just because we've won. Xenon's holoratory was just the beginning. Quantax was merely telling us what lay ahead.'

'Quantax is weak-willed and overcautious, always hedging his bets. I thought even you agreed with me there.'

'Yes, yes, yes, but he's in his element now. Now that the fighting's over I think he'd be the best person to rebuild this planet.'

'I don't think the Cybertronians would share your enthusiasm.'

'Who cares what they think? They're just the work force, the tools we need to start anew. Remember Quantax's motto: *Now As Then*. Aren't you excited? The new trading centres, the manufacturing plants – and what about the Law Chambers? A Deathpit ten times larger than the one on

Quintesson, stocked with a thousand Sharkticons. We'll spread across the globe and establish our own city-states. How does that strike you, Ryknia? Your own city! This must be what the Harvest was like!

'You're really taken in by the Grand Scheme, aren't you? And there was me thinking that we were the sane ones. It all sounds very plausible inside a meeting chamber, Sevax, especially when you're gawping at the sound and light show: holo-prints, liquid grid-maps, speed-line projections, full-flow topography. Quantax had the equipment, a captive audience and a speech he prepared earlier. And you bought the whole thing.'

'Ah, but he's already found a location for the recycling plant, and the central spaceport is already designed. Any day now Xenon will arrive with the Cargo, and we can begin moving into the new cities.'

'Look below you, Sevax.'

The Polyhexian landscape was little more than a flaking corkboard, studded with millions of thumbtack holes. Continental slump was pulling the city-state apart at the seams.

'You expect us to rebuild a world like this overnight?'

'One minute to voluntary systems shutdown,' called Ultra Magnus, wandering through the upper decks like a Town Crier. Ratchet was leaning over Arcee at the end of the corridor, digging his hands into her stomach.

'Ratchet, I think—'

'Primus!' He fumbled the laser scalpel and a surge of sparks climbed the wall. 'What are you doing, trying to give me a fuel-pump malfunction?'

'I called you – I'm sorry. I thought you heard me.'

'No. I'm very busy.'

'I know. That's why I want you to shut yourself down like everyone else. You need to conserve your run-time.'

Ratchet was already shaking his head. 'I've got seven more Autobots to tend to. I'm not resting 'til they're stable.'

'I know for a fact that you've stabilised every injured soldier on board – you'd practically reset their CPUs before we entered hyperspace.' They both looked at Arcee. 'You're performing secondary ops now, and they can wait.'

'But the more I repair, the more—'

'Look at you, doctor – you can barely stand! I realise how much you want to get the others up and running, but you're killing yourself. I'm ordering you to rest.'

Ratchet laid his scalpel aside. 'Okay. Okay.'

Magnus walked away and turned when he realised that Ratchet was not following. The medic was propped up against the wall, as if bolted to the spot. Ratchet met his gaze with wide, guilty eyes and quietly slumped onto the floor.

The steel chairs were arranged in a rigid block: four deep, seven wide. Up front, Silverbolt activated autopilot, grabbed a seat and looked about hopefully for a companion. Autobots arrived in twos and threes, filling the back rows first. Trailbreaker, Mirage, Bluestreak and Hound found four empty places in a row. Death's Head stood alone in an alcove, pretending to be interested in his fingernails.

Ultra Magnus burst in with Ratchet slumped over his shoulder and arranged him on the nearest chair. 'He burnt himself out,' he explained.

Mirage carried out a cursory examination: back of the neck, optics, mouth, chest plate. 'He'll recover. Just give his internal repairs system a few minutes to reboot his CPU.'

That was good enough for Ultra Magnus. 'Everyone to your places,' he said. 'Ratchet's condition underlines the importance of conscientious energon rationing.' He ran an invisible finger over 21 seated figures and frowned: he was one short. Smokescreen was leaning against the doorframe, staring at his feet. 'What's the matter? You've activated voluntary systems shutdown before, surely?'

'Of course I have,' said Smokescreen, drawing Magnus into the corridor. 'It's the bounty hunter I'm worried about. We're shutting ourselves down and expecting him to do likewise? What, out of courtesy?'

He may be ten thousand times more energy efficient than we are! What's to stop him murdering us all in our sleep?

'Well he wouldn't get his money, for one thing.'

'We're talking about someone who shot a fleeing Inferno in the back. He wasn't motivated by monetary gain then. He's a killer, Magnus: he has killed and he will do so again. I'm not off-lining with him around.'

Death's Head approached them from the other side of the Bridge, having guessed exactly what they were saying. Their conversation might as well have been broadcast in quadrasonic stereo.

'Save the paranoia, yes? I couldn't shut myself down if I wanted to. Not your basic household appliance. Don't have an on/off switch.'

'Then there's only one thing for it,' said Magnus, beckoning them both down the corridor.

A few moments later Death's Head was locked in the science lab. He sat on a worktop and listened to the muffled voices outside.

'I've scrambled the release code. He's sealed in 'til override.'

'What if he punches his way through?'

'Impossible. That door would hold Galvatron.'

'As long as he's on board I won't feel safe.'

'There's nothing else we can do. Come on.'

Back on the bridge, Ultra Magnus checked that everyone was off-line, took his place in the front row and bowed his head. A shutdown command passed across his program files like a guillotine, severing all connections.

Prowl dabbed his burning cheek and examined his fingertip: a scrawny speck of oil was racing down its sinuous contours. He looked at his reflection in the corridor wall and saw the scratch on his chiselled cheekbone (triple-laned, diagonal, frizzed with epidermal circuitry). Nano-filters were already sealing the gash and stemming the lube-flow, but a tiny scar would remain.

The drills roared in the background. He looked at his aggressor through the gaps in his fingertips.

'You hit me.'

'Yes. I did.' Kup was holding a grimy industrial drill in one hand and buzzing on the spot. 'Actually no, it was more of a slap.'

The shock still contorted Prowl's facial muscles. He looked puzzled and alone.

'Well what did you expect?' Kup quickly checked that none of the excavation team – Crossblades, Triniad, Rephlex, Rad and Slapdash – had seen the blow. The five of them were too busy pummelling Rodimus Prime's medi-vault. 'Well? You come barging down the corridor, arms flailing, screaming something about taking the Matrix from Rodimus. You shocked me, I reacted. What did you expect?'

'That's a poor excuse and you know it. You didn't even hear me out.'

'What more is there to say?' Kup was straining to be heard above the drilling but did not move away from the door. It was as if he and Prowl were standing in a wind tunnel, lashed with noise. 'You know what, Prowl? You're raving. First you snatch leadership and now you want the Matrix!'

'I don't want the Matrix for myself! I want to see if it can be used on the others – on our injured.'

'Rodimus is injured!'

'Look Kup...' Prowl ran his hand over his head and shifted on the spot, wondering whether to continue. 'Rodimus isn't going to make it. He *isn't*. I'm sorry. I know that the Matrix is the only thing keeping him alive right now, but it's not enough to resuscitate him. You're just delaying the —'

Kup threw the drill aside. 'Go on. Finish what you were going to say.'

'It's just a matter of time before he dies.'

'How can you *say* things like that?' Kup sounded genuine puzzled. 'What is wrong with that logician's head of yours?'

'Just for once, Kup, forget about me and look around you. I have 50 Autobots who are going to die unless I do something. The Matrix might be able to save them. They're not comatose like Prime: they can be repaired. Do I have to spell it out for you? One life for 50. What do you say? You assumed responsibility for Prime – you decide.'

‘Assumed responsibility? You make him sound like a pet! He’s my best friend.’ Kup clicked his fingers. ‘You and Optimus! He was the only person you’ve ever been close to! Imagine it were him in there.’

‘Optimus would’ve begged me to remove the Matrix. Hell, I’d have torn it from his chest!’

‘You know what? I believe you. You’d have taken the Matrix, and then stepped into his shoes.’

Prowl felt his fingers fold and nestle in his palm. ‘You’re not thinking straight. 50 Autobots, Kup. 50 Autobots who don’t deserve your stubborn, pig-headed refusal to accept what’s happening.’

‘I don’t care. No one touches him.’ Kup quickly looked behind him, half-expecting Prowl to have arranged for others to have broken in and snatched the Matrix while they were arguing. ‘I’ve protected him this long. I’m not going to sit back and let you murder him.’

‘I wanted to discuss this with you reasonably. You obviously don’t understand. At the end of the day, I’m your commander. I heed no higher authority. With or without your consent I’m going to remove the Matrix.’

‘Over my dead body,’ said Kup, retrieving his drill and jabbing it in Prowl’s direction.

Prowl looked around for a weapon and saw Rev-Tone and Quark running down the corridor.

‘We’ve found a way out!’ yelled Rev-Tone. ‘The ward extension! They were a hair’s-breadth away from breaking into another set of utility ducts!’

Prowl wanted to hug them but couldn’t even muster the energy to smile. Once again, his world had been reshaped in an instant. ‘Did you hear that, Kup? We can escape.’

Kup’s reply was smothered by an explosion. The corridor shivered and regained composure.

‘There’s someone at the door,’ said Rev-Tone.

Kickback and Ramjet huddled in opposite corners of their cell and watched droplets of grease slide down the walls, grubby nosed and silver tailed. They talked in Kledji language, a ragged patois coaxed from the back of the throat.

‘Dead? Maybe yes.’ Ramjet rubbed his eyes. ‘Quint said all resistance crushed.’

‘Sixshot? No no no.’

‘Perhaps they bombed the Leagus. Wipe out.’

‘Stop. Don’t talk like that.’

‘If Sixer and rest still out there, why haven’t they attacked?’

Kickback’s brain felt cloudy. He started banging his head against the wall. ‘Wish Soundwave was still alive.’

The electro-bars slid open and the guards threw a slab of wet metal onto the floor. It had arms, legs and a misshapen head. It stank: roasting copper, top-heavy chemicals and melted rubber.

The Decepticons fell upon Sunstreaker, prodding and poking him with scabby fingers. The Autobot rolled over and left half his chest on the floor. His face was stripped to the basics: scaffold and primary-coloured wiring. Two silvery craters dented his forehead like oyster shells.

Slamdance hung in the neighbouring cell, eavesdropping as always. He heard the grunts and fumbles, the obscenities, the slippery drip of grease on grilling.

That was it. That was the final straw.

It was time to go.

Hundreds of Quintessons stood outside AMC1 and raked the waters with laserfire, setting the slop alight. Stray shots caught the curve and bounced around the ducts, trapped in an infinite prism of ricochet. A customised path-blaster filled an entire utility duct, its reactor coils pumping engex into the core as it prepared for the opening shot.

Prowl raced through the med-centre barking orders into wards and offices.

‘We’re not fighting them! There’s another way out – corridor C33!’

He ducked into E Ward and took one last look at the dead patients, stacked like foldaway chairs. He started moving his hand over their cool bodywork – Ammo’s preposterously thick forearms, the locus curve of Warpath’s spine, Rescue’s slender hands – and was brought back to reality by a sound more frightening than the mini-blitz outside: the sound of drilling.

'I told you to leave this!' he shouted, running towards Rodimus Prime's medi-vault.

Kup leant into his drill. The rest of his team huddled around him, chipping at the cracks. The far end of the corridor was starting to glow. The Quintessons were nearly inside.

'We're beating a retreat,' said Prowl. 'We don't have time for this. You're not going to break through.'

Rephlex stopped. Crossblades stopped. Slapdash stopped. Kup screamed for them to continue.

Prowl shook his head.

Rad stopped. Triniad stopped.

'Anyone who deserts will be court-martialled!' Kup yelled, not looking up.

'I'm in command here. Everyone leaves. Now.' The excavation team deserted their tools, slipped past Prowl and sprinted off.

'You shouldn't have done that,' said Kup, his forehead damp with lubricant. He lunged forward, snapped the drill bit, screamed and threw the tool aside.

'Do you want me to beg? Do you want me to beg you to come with me?'

'I'm not leaving him. Not for you, not for the Autobots, not for anything.' Kup picked up another drill and resumed his attack. A fresh layer of shielding split and crumbled, slipping to the floor in a miniature avalanche.

The explosions outside suddenly stopped. Prowl leant towards the medi-vault door – so close that the grit dashed his bodywork – and studied Kup's face with a mixture of sadness and sympathy. 'Very well, I'm begging you. Let's go.'

Kup started screaming.

Prowl turned to go, froze, picked up a piece of vault door and brought it down hard over Kup's neural cluster, flooring him instantly. He dropped low and fumbled the nape of his neck, struck by the colossal silence. There was the wound – minor, as intended. He slung the robot over his shoulders, took one last look inside the vault ('I'm so sorry, Rodimus'), and jogged towards C33.

The entrance to AMC1 exploded behind him. Flames roared across every surface, lining the walls like velvet. He felt the heat lapping at his heels and lunged into a connecting corridor.

If he'd waited until the flames had subsided, if he'd waited until the smoke had cleared, he'd have seen that the medi-vault door had a hole – a pinprick – at the bottom of its deepest, newest crater.

Chromedome hovered near F Ward, a weapon in each hand. In one direction he could see Perceptor standing alongside a hole in the wall, bundling escapees into the utility duct. In the other, there was just a stretch of empty corridor.

'Where's Prowl?' called Perceptor, ferrying Throwback through the hole.

'Good question.' Chromedome expected a pack of Quintessons to come charging around the corner, all claws and molars and emerald eyes, with Prowl's dismembered corpse bobbing above their heads like gravel in a sieve. His trigger fingers started prickling.

Perceptor jogged to his side. 'Everyone's through except Prowl and Kup. Given their proximity to the entrance and the Quintessons' method of entry... ah. There they are now.'

Prowl ran towards them, Kup wrapped around his neck. Chromedome snatched the body and passed it through the escape hatch, no questions asked. Prowl and Perceptor followed, jumping into thick sewage. Nosecone, Pointblank and Getaway pushed them aside and began sealing the hole.

Prowl pushed his way through the crowd and looked around. They were standing on the baseline of a semicircular junction, with eight ducts leading in eight different directions.

'We're sealed,' said Nosecone, folding his blowtorch into his wrist.

'It's not going to fool them for long,' said Perceptor. 'They'll know we've escaped somehow.'

'Then let's go!' Prowl splashed towards the nearest tunnel.

'You're just taking your pick, right?' Chromedome jogged to the mouth of another tunnel. 'Because if we go *this* way...' He pressed his hand to his mouth. 'Let me see. We're outside the north face of the AMC. If we went down this duct we'd be heading towards Stanix... The Institute of Higher Programming is on the southern border of Korten, about 60 miles away. It's deserted, it's safe, it's—'

'Where we're heading,' finished Prowl, defecting to Chromedome's corner. 'We should be out of sight before they trace us.'

The rest of the Autobots flowed past Chromedome and Prowl, many weighed down with the injured and immobile. Prowl looked away as Kup was carried past.

Meanwhile, inside AMC1, Q-715 waded through the shifting rubble counting blast marks on the medi-vault wall. Someone was whispering through the audio-chip in his ear.

‘We’ve searched the entire complex, sir. We’ve found bodies – about 40 – but I’m told that these are the leftovers from an earlier purge. There’s no one else here.’

‘Once again, they flee rather than fight.’

‘Shall I give chase? I suspect some hidden escape route.’

‘I don’t think that will be necessary. They could be anywhere. Besides, we have what we came for. 715 out.’

He looked at Rodimus Prime lying peacefully on his deathbed, tagged by a lonely energon feed, and pushed his fingers into the Autobot’s chest as if it were piecrust. The life support monitor skipped and a suddenly frenzied spark-line went off the scale. Underneath Prime’s firebrand chest plate was the Matrix, wrapped in its familiar casing.

He went to touch the bright blue orb but his fingers were met with resistance – subtle but persistent, as if the Matrix was shielded by a weak magnetic field. At the same time, his feet pressed that bit harder against the floor and he found it difficult to focus. He flexed his fingers, concentrated, and broke the invisible seal. As his hungry hands made contact, a spasm of heat ran up his arm.

The Matrix came away easily: linkage pins snapped happily, balance frames loosened without argument, and every nut and bolt became lax. He held it at arm’s length, afraid it might implode, or shatter, or disintegrate; perhaps he might trip some age-old contact lock and hitherto unknown absorption pores would suck him inside. But no, it just winked and shimmered, content to bounce blue light against a thousand chips and kinks and facets. He brought it close to his face and looked through the crystalline coating.

Amazing, he thought, disconnecting Rodimus Prime’s life support cable without taking his eyes off the Matrix. It looked exactly as the Old Texts described it.

Well, the screaming had finally stopped.

Slamdance had long held that Autobot and Decepticon screams were subtly different – not by much, of course, but by enough to question whether they were based on one and the same genetic template. Screaming was often said to be the purest sound: the true screamer has no control over the sound he is making. For whatever reason – some intricate delineation in the voice box or some program quirk in the synth-chords – Autobot screams were always tinged with surprise, as if the screamer is amazed that he can make such a sound. Decepticons were far more visceral, screaming only when wounded or tortured. Their screams were ragged and guttural, and continued until the pain stopped.

Sunstreaker’s scream had been problematic, though, sounding neither Autobot nor Decepticon. It was a thick-whipped combination of raw nerves and psychological horror, and it had gone on *forever*. Slamdance searched for comparisons. Perhaps it was the noise that a freshly minted bio-morph made as it punched its way from the iron womb and hit the floor as boneless silicate. Perhaps it was the sound of the Matrix itself, the howling, lung-less cacophony that would fill the room – then the city, then the world – if you cracked its perfect surface and loosed the essence of the Creator. Perhaps it was the sound that your mind would make if you lip-read the suicide code, if the digits 4/11.002983712 passed from your mem-net to your neural cluster. Perhaps it was the sound the First Ones made when they dragged themselves from Cybertron’s scalding, fudgy surface all those years ago; when Primon and his council moulded themselves from sizzling techno-genetic mud and realised they were alive.

Sunstreaker had been silenced by a swift, savage beating from Ramjet and Kickback (as savage as was possible when an Inhib Chip was sapping all your strength). Slamdance wondered how many Autobots had silently cheered them on when the blows fell, and how many hated themselves when the egotist finally swallowed his tongue.

He watched his cellmate, Hoist, flicker in and out of consciousness. The engineer’s head moved from side to side as if he were following a bee drunk on pollen, except his optic sensors were trapped behind

memorial lids. He was lost in a reverie, a gin-soaked dream of needles and daylight and long-dead Autobot leaders. Arriving as a Grade A, he had reacted badly to his Inhib Chip and, on re-inspection, been downgraded to sub-drone class, suitable for ComSim fodder and windowsills.

Slamdance looked through the electro-bars. No guards, no voices. Jolup had grown bored of playing psychopath and disappeared. About 20 Transformers – Autobot and Decepticon, though mostly the latter – had been dragged Downstairs, the majority kicking and bleating like lambs. He suspected that the other two Quintessons, the ones who looked as if they were related to Skywarp and Lancer, were roaming ‘New Quintyxia’ and gathering new inmates. He leant as close to the bars as his chains would allow and studied their neon geometry. Too thinly spaced to squeeze through as a duo-form, but as a component robot...

Slamdance was a Duobot. Like the Decepticon Squawkbox, he was the sum total of two robots (in this case Raindance – cassette/reconnaissance jet – and Grandslam – cassette/all-terrain tank) capable of physical and mental interconnection.

Despatched to the outskirts of Polyhex by Siren to monitor Decepticon activity, Raindance and Grandslam had witnessed the Quintessons’ arrival from land and air. They had merged into their bipedal configuration to escape on foot but been captured on the border. As Slamdance, they had been clawed, scanned and bundled into a convict pod.

The Inhibitor Chip had attacked Slamdance’s combined CPU – which was essentially Grandslam’s neuronet with a few Raindance add-ons. Less susceptible to the mechrobe’s influence, Raindance had already separated his mind from Grandslam’s – not easy when Grandslam, acutely aware of his intentions and his motivations, was begging him not to go. Such drastic measures had, however, prevented the chip from infecting them both. Now, having properly recovered from the shock of mental severance, Raindance wondered what to do next.

Grandslam became the upper torso of the Slamdance module; he, Raindance, became the waist and legs. The Quintessons, it seemed, knew nothing of bi-combiners – the two bodies were adjoined by standard limb-lock coupling but not molecularly entwined. He sensed Grandslam’s drowsy, muddled pain and realised that the Inhib Chip had taken over his partner’s share of their neural cluster completely. He was the lucky one: he had escaped infection. And if he could shed Grandslam’s mind, what about his body? Thanks to the loud-mouthed guards, he knew that one of the Inhibitor’s prime functions (before ident-tagging, tracking and mind-control) was modular paralysis. Theoretically, someone like him could still transform, but first he had to disconnect himself from Grandslam.

He wondered what would become of his partner. A mechanical chimera with no proper form or function, he’d probably be fed to the Sharkticons or used to stuff the cracks in draughty cells. He disengaged with a heavy squelch of popping sockets. He hit the floor hard but the pain felt good: it was real, it was immediate. He felt his morphcore connect with a network of motors and transformed into a slim, dark blue jet. His vision returned via cockpit-wired optics.

The electro-bars were not that tightly meshed, but it was still impossible to fly between them. One option remained, although it was best not to think about it too much or—

‘Where are we?’ screamed Hoist, his eyes flicking open. ‘Where is everyone? Where’s Optimus? Optimus will save us.’

‘I know,’ said Raindance, activating his fuselage thrusters and balancing on a cushion of antigravity. ‘I know.’ He lunged for the electrobars, transformed into cassette mode and slipped between them unscathed. It took him a moment to realise that he was still functioning, but by then he had skidded off the walkway and gone into freefall. He returned to jet mode and began to climb.

Quintessons appeared on every block and tried to clip his wings. Their laserfire skimmed across his nose and reacted with the electro-bars opposite, generating bursts of white sparks that covered his escape. He passed the uppermost cellblock and kept going. In his world of black on black it was near impossible to plot a course, but up ahead a slab of darkness seemed more intense than the rest. He fired two pencil-thin heat-seekers (unreachable during the strip-down) and rocketed out of Mt Edeus’ peak.

Inside, 70 levels down, Grandslam’s brain module fizzled out and died.

They used to be called the Terbium Plains – a listless band of tempered osmium prone to weak tectonic subsidence, high-velocity blister-winds and meagre gravity wells that stretched between four city-states with equally outdated names. Like the Rust Sea and the Petrohexian Lowlands, like Tene and Stanix



and Nova Point, the Terbium Plains no longer existed. Like the Manganese Mountains and the Mercury Bayou, like Lonium and Helex and the Primal Chamber, they had become another as-yet-unchristened portion of New Quintyxia; a slab of virgin topography with undecided boundaries; dotted lines and contours on a bottle-green holo-globe somewhere inside an Aquarian council chamber.

And while the same brownish copper hills warped the horizon line and the same indolent noontday sun drove shadows across the surface, everything had changed: they were Quintesson hills. It was a Quintesson horizon. The sun warmed a Quintesson world.

Wheeljack, Sygnet, Mainframe and Centurion continued their trek towards the Sonic Canyons, crushing their reflections underfoot. They had witnessed Xenon's pronouncements but, as Wheeljack pointed out, declaring control of a planet and actually controlling it were two different things. Where, he'd said, were the thousands of shuttles honeycombing the sky? Where were the patrol squads a thousand men thick, scouring the landscape and removing all trace of the planet's forebears? Nothing had changed, he argued. They were still alone. The Plains were still flat. The sky was still cloudlessly blue.

Wheeljack and Sygnet walked side-by-side, their broad shoulders close to collision. A notable distance behind them was Mainframe and Centurion, dragging their heels.

'Mainframe..?'

'...What?'

Centurion looked at him bashfully. Over the last 50 miles he'd asked Mainframe about everything from pre-Decacycle Tarnian pantheism to the bandwidth of the legendary Primal Spectrum; from post-war population distribution to the etymological intricacies of the 'bot/'con suffix. His thirst for knowledge was unquenchable; for Mainframe, it was also incredibly tiring.

'Wheeljack and the Decepticon...'

'Sygnet.'

'Why are they talking to each other?' It didn't seem proper, he thought. A few minutes ago Wheels had actually laughed out loud.

'Well let's see... why do you think?'

Centurion paused. 'I suppose it's because the planet's been overrun. Now you have a common enemy, the civil war falls temporarily by the wayside. Allegiances are forgotten, personal disagreements are put aside and everyone is united in the name... in the name of freedom.'

'Actually, they're chatting because they're friends. They know each other. We weren't all poured into Autobot and Decepticon moulds, you know. Sygnet was Wheeljack's apprentice. They ran a construction shop in Tene. When Megatron declared war, they joined the Autobot army as weapons specialists. Behind their badges, they have a lot in common.'

'So why did Sygnet defect?'

'I think he became fed up with Wheeljack getting all the praise. While Wheels was promoted to Strikeforce Alpha, he was sent to Eocra to build biodegradable cluster bombs. I don't know. I think he offered his services to Megatron to get recognised.'

'Then he's one hell of an attention seeker.'

'Yeah, he was our highest-profile turncoat after Skywarp. A few of the younger ones wanted payback, but he disappeared from view. Chained to a workbench in Darkmount, I guess, devising ever more elaborate ways of killing Autobots. He became the Decepticons' greatest weapons engineer.'

'And yet there he is, having a chat with Wheeljack.'

They reached the base of the hills and picked out a path between the slopes. Wheeljack beckoned them over and pointed to the remains of a shuttle in the valley below. The crash had not been recent: no smoke escaped the triangle of rocket thrusters, and the blast hole near the back looked stone cold.

'It's not one of ours,' said Sygnet, climbing towards the crash site. 'Fan out and close in. Shoot anything that moves. We're not taking any risks.'

Mainframe studied the blast patterns and concluded that a freak engine flare had brought the shuttle down. He bit his lip at the carnage inside. Decepticon bodies had accumulated at the low end, spiked and roasted, braised in oil. He activated his headlamps and saw softly glowing chains, Inhib Claws and rainbow-coloured lubricant. It was a convict ship.

Behind a delicate tangle of body parts – foot/face/finger/head/hand/hip – he saw a cockpit door. He shoulder-barged the perforated metal and crashed into the dashboard beyond. The dead pilot's hands were

clamped around the navi-stick and his head was smeared across the side window, darkening the glass. Mainframe climbed through the broken windscreen and handed Wheeljack a length of mangled machinery.

‘A present for you, Wheels. You get to keep it if you can tell me what’s missing.’

‘Hmm. I’m guessing that these are your basic piloting and navigation controls...’ Wheeljack poked his finger through a rectangular gap. ‘The communication equipment is missing. The short-range ECT would’ve gone here.’

‘There was another pilot in that shuttle, Wheels. I’m sure of it.’

‘Sygnet thought the same thing. He and Centurion went to find him.’

Three gunshots echoed around the valley. Sygnet and Centurion appeared on a hilltop and rolled a limp green body down the slope. ‘We caught him trying to radio his friends,’ Sygnet said.

Mainframe stopped the Quintesson with his foot and cocked his head at the three gaping exit wounds. ‘Right in the back. Nice shooting, Sygnet,’ he said coldly.

‘Compliment this guy, not me.’

Centurion looked away.

‘We’ve covered about 90 miles in the last few hours,’ said Wheeljack, scaling the copper-coated hill. He scanned the horizon and saw them: six of them, in fact: six Quintessons on hoverbikes speeding towards them.

There it was again.

Death’s Head pressed his head against the lab door and fine-tuned his audios. His horns made close-contact difficult; not for the first time he considered filing them off and changing his name, but the cost of reprinting all those business cards...

He heard another explosion. He couldn’t guess the proximity and could feel no tremor, but the volume was steadily increasing. Was the Ark under attack? No. Impossible. Silverbolt had rigged an early-warning alarm system: if the Quintessons were outside, the Autobots would be reactivated.

The next explosion tickled the soles of his boots. Someone was inside – on board. He looked around the dimly lit room. Whoever it was would find the Autobots and... He dashed between worktops, knocking microscopes and test tubes to the floor as he searched for a comms-link, a spy-cam, anything that would let him see what was happening. He wasn’t going to miss this slaughter for the world.

He found a suitable monitor and peered closer. A grainy figure – a Quintesson – was running through the corridors, breaking things.

Had the Quintesson been content to locate and destroy the Autobot crew, everything would have been fine. He could have laid low until the space pirate had fled, then broken free, taken control of the Ark, jettisoned the bodies and set a course for Scarvix and the next cred-check. The Ark would’ve settled the debts. But no – this particular Quintesson was hell-bent on destroying the Autobots *and* their spacecraft – with him on board.

Death’s Head unscrewed his left hand, pulled a gold-plated interface needle from his wrist and plugged himself into an access port. His body tensed as a failsafe code collapsed and Aunty’s low-level security codes laid themselves bare. He disconnected himself from the wall and walked through the open door.

The control room was thick with found-sound and tenth-generation digital information, with whispered binary, codes and modals. Senior officers sat at their desks, wedged earpieces into audio canals and barked into microphones that bobbed against their lips.

General Quantax swept down the aisle and the reports flew like buckshot.

‘General! Quadrant T440, a.k.a. the “Dead End”, is now completely levelled; terraforming teams moving in to—’

‘—squad has combed Quadrant P13, formerly “Vos”; report zero activity in neighbouring sector—’

‘Lieutenant Jolup confirms receipt of Grade Bs and requests that—’

‘—structural integrity of Sirrom Mining Complex makes it an ideal location for the west sector smelting pool.’

‘Incoming message from Q-715, mid-range.’

'Patch him through,' said Quantax, knotting his hands behind his back and facing the prime monitor. Q-715's face was chalky with static. He was holding the Matrix.

'You have it!' exclaimed Quantax.

'I hunted down the Autobot leader and tore the Matrix from his corpse.'

'Excellent, excellent.'

'Unfortunately, the other Autobots escaped. They fled the moment we breached their defences.' He paused to review his summary and added: 'Their leader stayed behind to cover their retreat. He was no match.'

'How many escaped?'

'I cannot say. A hundred. Less.'

'Return to base immediately - and bring Rodimus Prime's body with you.'

Inside Delphi's technical pool, Fastlane dragged a grimy fuel line from the jet plane's undercarriage and checked the bioscanner on his inside wrist. 'Can you hear me, Raindance? We found you about an hour ago. You'd crash landed.'

'... I think I ran out of fuel.'

'That's what we suspected,' said Siren, folding his arms. 'But no. You've got three full tanks. Fastlane thinks that you were simply too tired to keep flying.'

'It's the Inhibitor Chip, it makes you...' Even now, infused with energon, he felt the gentle bite of lethargy. 'It wears you down.'

Siren's second-in-command, Cloudraker, passed him a databoard. 'We haven't had the test results back, Raindance, but you were in a state of acute psychosis when you touched down outside. You were talking about microchips, red paint and something downstairs.'

Raindance transformed into cassette mode and was fed into the comms port. His voice boomed from the speakers as pictures of Polyhex under siege filtered on screen. 'This,' he said, 'will explain everything.'

Death's Head ran onto the bridge and for a moment thought that the Autobots were already dead. They were arranged like incubated babies, glowing white in the half-light - except there were no colour-coded wires or bobbed tubing, no thumbs in mouths or plastic tags on puppyish ankles. The Autobots were cold and rigid, their bodies little more than spray-painted containment boxes: packaging to protect their humming brain modules.

He shook Ultra Magnus by the shoulders and, when there was no reaction, prised open an optic cover. 'Oh well. Guess I have to do it the hard way.' He stood back and punched Magnus in the face. The Autobot's bodyweight pinned him to the chair, auto-lock mechanisms ensuring that only his head snapped sideways. Death's Head delivered a second, harder punch. When he pulled back for a third and final attempt, someone grabbed his wrist.

'Step away or I'll shoot,' said Ratchet, a pistol in his free hand.

'Relax. Misunderstanding, eh?'

'That's what I thought. Now, would you mind telling me what's going on?'

'You have a Quintesson on board, heading this way. I was trying to warn the others, yes?'

'You can't override voluntary systems shutdown by punching someone in the face.'

'Exactly the hypothesis I was testing. So how come—?'

'I was injured. I didn't shut myself down.' Ratchet holstered his weapon and ran for the door. 'If you're in such a philanthropic mood you can help me find the intruder.'

'What about the others? Could use their firepower.'

'There's no way to forcibly resuscitate an off-liner.'

'Really?' Death's Head followed Ratchet after a parting punch that knocked Smokescreen to the floor. 'Hmm. Guess you're right, yes?'

Bright-eyed and twitchy from digging death-pits in Mytharc, the Quintessons had been tempted to simply wade in and open fire. But no, they'd gone by the book: three-way squad division, scout n' rout

sidewinder tactics, the ever-popular pincer movement, diversionary flash-fire and an 11<sup>th</sup> hour slaughterhouse rush. No fudge or slack or leeway. The Autobots, suddenly surrounded, didn't know what was happening.

Wheeljack dashed between circling hoverbikes. Craters sprang open at his heels, circuitry burst from his back, his legs buckled and he fell. Lying beside a gutted hoverbike, he laid his gun-arm flat and squeezed off a few shots. He ignored the emergency codes scrolling down his optic sensors and tried to keep focused. He was sure he'd just seen two new figures skidding down the hillside, darting in and out of shadows. With pained resignation he counted another internal glitch: outdated visual data was being cross-referenced from his mem-net archives: he was hallucinating.

Okay, so maybe they weren't hallucinations. Hallucinations couldn't leap onto passing hoverbikes and kick the pilots into their own jet-flame; they couldn't perch on ledges and pick off riders one by one, or somersault between explosions. That only left one possibility: that Nightbeat and his friend were real.

But... but... wasn't Nightbeat posted at Delphi? What was he doing out here, and who was that Optimus look-alike fighting alongside him? One of Swerve and Pincher's tasteless experiments? Before he could even begin to think about the other alternatives – hard-light holograms, thought-projections, evo-clones, Decepticon doppelgangers, shape-shifters and quasi-autonomous facsimile constructs – he was hit by a shaft of divine light. It pinned him to the spot, hesitated and then moved away, snaking across the battlefield. He looked up and saw a hovering spacecraft, too large to land in the valley, balancing on beams of light.

The tractor beam fell on Optimus Prime and pulled him carefully off the ground. He dangled in mid-air, a Quintesson in each hand. He looked up quizzically. Nightbeat was screaming his name and firing at the sky.

'Take cover!' yelled Wheeljack, pushing Sygnet and Centurion into the convict ship. 'Nightbeat! Get over here!'

Sygnet bundled the investigator inside. 'What's going on? Did you lead that Quint ship to us?'

'What? We came to save you!'

They were engulfed in green light. The weight slumped from their bodies and the floor peeled away from their feet. Loose components hung in the air, corpses rolled skyward and spilt lubricant gelled into glossy baubles.

Centurion sparked his boot-jets, ploughed through a nest of floating Decepticons, and started pushing against the floor. Flames fluttered like streamers at his heels.

'It's not working,' said Sygnet, bobbing in mid-air.

'Isn't it?' Nightbeat peered through the gaping hole in the side of the ship. 'We've stopped moving. The tractor beam can't cope with the weight.'

The colour in their world seeped away, green to white. The beam released its grip, and for a second time that day the convict ship crashed into the valley below.

It was a lot heavier than he thought.

Not surprising, when you considered what it actually *was*. When you considered what it actually was, it was amazing that it could fit in the palm of your hand at all. Surely it should be the size of a gas giant? Surely it should eclipse the sun? Surely whole galaxies should register as whorls of dust against its infinite surface? Ah, but that was why the Masters were so called; that was why they'd almost reached the Metarealm.

Quantax held the Matrix close to his chest and slid his fingers into the handgrips on either side. Even the casing intrigued him; slightly scuffed and as warm as sunny skin, he wondered when it had been added. There was no record of it being there in the first place... but then there had to be some way for Primon to hook it inside his tin-pot chest.

He wondered if this was what it felt like to be an Autobot leader, to be one of the 'Matrix Masters' scattered across the Cybertronian sparkline. It was a strange feeling, like being pushed and pulled simultaneously. No wonder Ghyrik was swayed, no wonder he demurred; the Matrix did that: it sung to you. Perhaps it was the historical baggage – the images of Weaver teams and deep-core drilling – but for the first time he felt a direct link with the Progenitors.

He held the orb above his head, willing the energies to possess him. Nothing happened, and he immediately scolded himself for entertaining such an idea. The likes of Ghyrik had birthright interface capabilities because of they shared a tiny piece of Unicron; he was just a run-of-the-mill Neoseed, a mass-produced trooper made good – hell, he'd only undergone the Nomenclature Ceremony a few hundred years ago. The Matrix didn't take to commoners. Even inside his personal quarters, deep inside the fortress, he felt embarrassed. Dead eyes probed his back and he swung around. The Autobot corpse was still propped idiotically against his recharge slab.

Rodimus Prime had reverted to Hot Rod, his greying body having shrivelled up like a dead flower the moment the Matrix had been taken away. Quantax knew nothing of the Autobot leader's past, of body-prints and past-form storage, shape echoes and reversion fields, but he knew the power of the Matrix. He knelt down and turned the Autobot's crumbling head from side to side, looking for a flicker of life in his deep frost optics. Flakes of skin stuck to his fingers. There was no life there.

The wall shimmered as the liquid vidscreen moulded itself into a rectangle. Quantax knew who was calling.

'You have the geode?' asked Xenon.

'I have it.'

Suddenly the air grew restless. Condensation formed on the walls and a Sharkticon clad in telearmour phased into the room.

'Load the Matrix into his waist compartment,' ordered Xenon. 'We don't have much time.'

'Is it wise to send the trooper back so soon? Surely he should rest and recharge before another leap?'

'We charged the telearmour to ensure a two-way trip.'

'I was thinking more of the trooper. Two warp space journeys in quick succession – is it safe?'

'I don't care about the trooper and I don't believe you do either. No more delaying tactics, Quantax. Send the Matrix now.'

The Sharkticon accepted the Matrix, gave a sloppy salute, engaged warp mode and disappeared. His teleporter's shadow lingered even as he reappeared on screen, blackened and disoriented. Xenon split the eggshell armour and scooped out the Matrix.

'Commander, Ryknia has not yet received the *aqua fortis* sample. He is desperate to run some tests.' Quantax was only half concentrating: a moment ago he'd held the geode, the object that had cost six million Weavers their lives. Now it was light years away, wrapped tight in bimetallic tentacles.

'Yes, yes, yes, very well. Haxian will send a sample as soon as we find another teleport trooper. Are all the indigenous Cybertronians accounted for?'

'Yes,' lied Quantax. 'Everything is under control.'

'Once I have used the geode I will head for New Quintyxia. I am eager to survey our homeworld. Besides, Aquaria is starting to deteriorate.'

The transmission ended and the wall rippled itself flat. Quantax thought about the rogue band of Autobots he had indirectly forsaken to obtain the Matrix. The scent had been lost. They could be literally anywhere on or in the planet, biding their time.

He would find them. He would lure them out.

The utility duct opened onto an underground reservoir. Thin-lipped steps rose from the opposite shoreline and led to a graffitied door.

'Here we are,' said Chromedome proudly. 'The Institute of Higher Programming. This is the back door. When the war heated up we had to find a way to slip in and out unnoticed.'

'I stand corrected,' said Rev-Tone, shifting an unconscious Kup from one shoulder to another. 'According to the archives, this place is a pile of smoking microchips.'

'It is. Well, half of it is.' Chromedome passed his hands across the door like a safecracker. 'The Decepticons ripped the main hall to shreds shortly after Arklaunch, during the Rockfall Summit. Guess they were willing to sacrifice a handful of Decepticon delegates to remove Xaaron and 200 Autobot scientists from the picture. After that, Highbrow, Brainstorm and myself moved to the Manganese Mountains to enrol in Fortress Maximus's squad, but the rest of the fraternity stayed behind to rebuild. They made some headway before the Council of Elders repossessed the place.' He thumped a hinge and the door swung

open. 'They used it as a viral research centre for a few thousand years, back when electronic warfare was *de rigueur*. Remember all those scare-stories about a Software War?'

They went inside. The Institute's basement had been converted into a primitive hangar/storage bay with all the warmth of a multi-storey car park. It was empty save for a couple of souped-up long-range mobile repair bays – MARBs – that had tipped over and rusted themselves to the floor.

Chromedome led the group upstairs and onto the ground floor. The corridor walls were studded with portholes overlooking the brittle Kortean landscape. Prowl tested the glass for thickness and used the contours of the horizon to pinpoint their location: far, far away from anyone.

The lights went on, revealing bullet holes on every surface. Everything was pink and wrinkled, worn away by slow decay. The Autobots spread out.

'Are you okay, Red Alert?' asked Perceptor. 'You seem distracted.'

'Am I the only one who feels exposed up here?'

'We have a greater chance of making contact with Siren if we're above ground. Chromedome thinks he can rig the comms-system to send a coded message.'

'Don't worry,' said Prowl, conscious that he'd said very little for the last few hours. 'We're in the backwaters of Korteia, squatting in an abandoned edu-centre, and the Quintessons have an entire planet to scour. We're okay. We finally have some time.'

'Hey Prowl, where do you want this?' Rev-Tone nodded towards Kup. 'He's starting to dent my shoulder plates. Shall I get someone to bring him back on line?'

'No. Let him come around naturally. He's had enough shocks for one day.'

'Perhaps it's only the one Quintesson,' said Ratchet, fanning smoke from his eyes.

'A fast one, yes?' Death's Head punched the vacuum lift doors. 'Almost had him, though. Think he's heading downwards.'

'The engine rooms.'

Ratchet led Death's Head into the second vacuum lift. They slid towards the Ark's lowest level. Ratchet folded his arms and stared at the polished floor. 'I suppose we're lucky. If the Quintesson knew what he was doing the Ark would be scattered across hyperspace by now.' The lift stopped. 'Careful, Death's Head. Let's take this slowly.'

The doors opened and Death's Head opened fire. Ratchet pulled him to the floor as the return salvo perforated the back wall. Q-2709 disappeared into the darkness while his pursuers disentangled themselves.

The engine rooms were held together by interstellar drive-blocks. Turbines haemorrhaged oil while the Ark's rear thrusters, half a mile east, flooded the floor with noise.

Death's Head picked out Ratchet's voice from among the cacophony – something about splitting up and taking half the floor each. Before he could reply, the doctor had run away. He headed in the opposite direction and found a wider corridor, one side of which was lined with anti-grav locks used to bring equipment on board whilst the Ark was docked alongside other spacecraft. Coolant gas spilled from ruptured casing and smeared the floor with a thick blue carpet. He switched to stealth mode, engaging a series of tried and trusted countermeasures. Thermal scramblers corrupted his bio-readout and optic filters switched to infrared (well worth the twenty thousand Shanix he'd paid a blacklisted programmer on Elpasos). He stopped short of subsonic audio, realising that upgrading his receptors in this environment would deafen him. He did have one last trick, though: motion scan. He bounced r-waves off his surroundings, created a perfect wire-map in his CPU, and hunted for random movement.

Success! The Quintesson was hunched against a nearby wall, pressed between red-hot turbines, edging closer.

Q-2709 looked at his forearm and tried to bind a wound with thumb and forefinger. Oil stretched like saliva into the smoke around his knees.

He was violent and unhinged (three years in cold storage after the CyberWar had not reinforced his fragile neuranet), but he had the capacity to fear, and with two armed mechanoids tracking him through enemy territory he had reason to be afraid. He stepped into a clearing. Someone was here, he could sense it.

He looked down at the shifting smoke and realised, too late, that the enemy was underneath him. Hundreds of spikes embedded themselves in his body and face, tearing through circuit pads and mechways.

Death's Head sat upright in the smoke like a vampire rising from his coffin, an empty dart-gun attachment falling from his wrist. Q-2709, meanwhile, clawed at the points of impact, crumpled to the floor and lay still.

Now for the fun part, thought Death's Head, opening an anti-grav hatch. He decided against calling Ratchet, fearing some boring tirade about the Autobot Code, and threw Q-2709 inside. The Quintesson looked up to as his murderer closed the airlock.

Q-2709 lunged for the door and grappled with the release catch, but his arms buckled and stretched new wounds. He was sucked into the void before his brain registered the noise of the outer door priming its release catch. His hands remained clamped to the inner hatch and then they too were carried away on the vacuum rush.

Death's Head laughed and foraged for his discarded wrist attachment. Ratchet came running.

'What happened? Did you find him?'

'What do you think I do for a living?'

'Where's the body?'

Death's Head looked at the antigrav chamber.

'You flushed him?! Primus! We needed him alive! Think about it! We know nothing about the Quintessons' motives – he could have told us everything: their strategy, the size of their army, their hardware, their—'

'Yes, yes, get the idea, eh? Heat of the moment. You'd have been the same.' He looked at him. 'Perhaps not.'

'At least the Ark's in one piece. When Magnus comes 'round, we'll – hang on.'

'What is it?'

'I could've sworn I heard something,' Ratchet paced up and down the corridor, frowning. 'I'm picking up signals from the Bridge.'

'Is that good or bad?'

'I don't know! Everyone's supposed to be off-line!' He ran towards the vacuum lift.

'Don't understand the urgency.'

'The others were primed to reboot themselves only if something was detected on the radar.'

'And you think that—'

They were thrown forwards as the Ark sustained a direct hit.

'Yes, I do.'

The debriefing chamber had always been too large for the meagre complement of Autobots stationed at Delphi. It had the dimensions of a cathedral, the chill of a mortuary, and row upon row of empty seats. Siren and his men usually preferred to hold their daily conference in Cloudraker's mechanical pool – one of many traditions borne of eight years in the wilderness, hundreds of miles away from the nearest Decepticon settlement.

The Delphi crew had used their self-described 'exile' to glamorise a comparatively mundane function: surveillance, monitoring and munitions runs. They were the outsiders, the disaffected loners on the front line – or so they liked to think. Delphi's links with the outside world had been re-established the moment a holographic Xenon had delivered his manifesto; then came Raindance, and suddenly they were on the frontline of the war against the Quintessons.

They sat in the dark and watched Raindance's jittery surveillance footage. Siren studied the faces of his men from the shadows. Fastlane and Cloudraker, his joint seconds-in-command, sat in the front row; Omega Supreme and Sky Lynx stood at the back. In-between were Autobots of various ranks and sub-groups: Camshaft, Downshift, Chromar, Splashdown, Overdrive, Backstreet, Aragon, Hosehead, Skyfall, Swerve, Zetar, Groundbreaker, Sky High and more. Micromasters loitered in the aisle. Like everyone else, they let the atrocities wash over them, unable to react: it was somehow too shocking, too impossibly violent. The Polyhex massacre, the convict ships, the Inhibitor Claws and the concentration camp. Flogging, spraying, chipping. Slamdance had witnessed it all, from battlefield to prison cell, and smuggled it back into their home.

Then the picture went haywire, showing an escape sequence from the escapee's POV. Siren stepped onto the podium as the screen went dead.

‘This is not the first time I’ve seen Raindance’s surveillance footage,’ he began unsteadily, ‘but it still cuts me to the core. You may think that I have an advantage over you in that the pictures have had time to sink in; you may think that I have had time to come to terms with the enormity of what is happening out there. You’d be wrong.’

‘My last orders from Prowl were very clear. Wait until we call for you, he said. Wait until we know what’s happening. If I had known the size and scale of the threat, I would have arranged immediate transfer to Iacon. As it is, events have overtaken me. All communications with Autobase are down. All communications with Autobot City are down.’

‘The Quintessons may think that they have the run of Cybertron, but we still have time to retaliate.’ He waited for someone to respond – a sarcastic remark from Swerve, a loaded question from Splashdown – but the crowd was silent. He tried a different approach. ‘Did anyone recognise the location of the prison complex?’

‘Somewhere in the Manganese Mountains,’ said Hosehead. ‘Mount Edeus?’

‘Yes. I think the Quintessons have converted the old Novum Cahn asylum.’ Blueprints flashed onto the screen behind him. ‘The Manganesian Autobase has been deserted since 1986. It’s stripped bare but still accessible.’ He activated a laser-pointer in his fingertip. ‘This route connects the Autobase to Novum Cahn. If it’s still intact, it means that we have a way of burrowing into the prison undetected.’

‘I’ll gather a team immediately,’ announced Fastlane, springing to his feet and counting heads. ‘Skyfall, Aragon, Downshift—’

‘Sit down, Fastlane. Let me finish. The access route is actually a maintenance duct, a remnant from the days when Maximus’ base drew power from Novum’s generator core. It’s only big enough for Micromasters.’ There was muttering from the aisle. ‘Sky Lynx will drop Phaser, Blastmaster, Treadbolt and Sunrunner on the Resius border. Edeus is fifty miles away.’

‘What do we expect to get from this?’ asked Splashdown. ‘Can four Micros jailbreak a thousand prisoners?’ He looked at the robots in question. ‘No offence, guys.’

‘This isn’t a jailbreak,’ said Siren. ‘We want information on layout, capacity, patrols, and most importantly the paralysing microchip the Quintessons have administered to all inmates. We need a sample.’

‘And once we’ve got all that?’ said Swerve. ‘What then?’

Siren flooded the chamber with light. ‘Team dismissed.’

Wheeljack felt guilty, but at least he had answers.

He was sitting with Sygnet, Mainframe and Centurion on a narrow ridge overlooking the Sonic Canyons. The sun was coming up. A short distance away – just enough to establish deliberate separation – was Nightbeat, propped up against the cliff-face with his face in his hands.

Mainframe shook his head. ‘He wasn’t in a fit state for interrogation, Wheeljack.’

‘Hey, come on. I asked a few simple questions – like what the hell Optimus Prime was doing with him.’

Wheeljack remembered the aftermath of their brush with the Quintessons. The first to pull himself from the mangled convict ship, he had offered hands to Centurion and the others. At one point they thought Nightbeat was dead; in fact he had been momentarily struck dumb, paralysed with shock.

The scene that followed was not pretty. After performing rudimentary reboot procedures, Wheeljack had given their newest teammate all of three seconds before bombarding him with questions. Was that the real Optimus Prime? How? What was he doing on Cybertron? Had someone finally made the trip to VsQs?

Nightbeat had stared at the stars and reeled off a passionless explanation. All the facts – the mission, the wormhole, the time-jump – were recited like cantos, perfectly formed but stripped of meaning. It hadn’t taken Wheeljack long to realise the enormous implications of Prime’s abduction by the Quintessons.

‘They’ll kill him, 25 years after he’s supposed to die!’

‘Or three years before,’ said Nightbeat flatly, ‘if you look at it from the other direction.’

Wheeljack had gathered up the others and left Nightbeat to process what had happened. By the time they’d reached the Sonic Canyons the investigator looked on the verge of a breakdown. He kept looking skyward, as if expecting a rift in space-time to appear, like the devil’s grin, on the horizon.

Now, perched outside the hidden entrance to Delphi, waiting for a sign that Siren’s team was still in residence, the investigator was sinking deeper and deeper into himself.



'Do you believe Nightbeat's story?' asked Mainframe quietly.

'Yes,' whispered Wheeljack. 'We all saw Optimus, and Nightbeat has no reason to lie to us.'

'So one of your old leaders has been, what, brought forward in time?' Centurion spoke at normal volume, and his voice boomed through the Canyons. As the echo rippled into infinity, Wheeljack put a stern hand on his shoulder.

'I don't want to have to tell you again,' he hissed. 'Keep your voice down. Anything louder than this is potentially lethal.'

'Why do you think they call this place the Sonic Canyons?' asked Sygnet. 'The natural dynamics of these canyons are unique. They snatch sound and amplify it, like the ultimate echo chamber. To the unprotected audio receptor, a loud bang would register at thousands of decibels.'

Nightbeat pulled his face from between his knees. 'Prime must still be alive,' he said decisively. 'If he weren't, none of this would exist. We'd have been annulled. We've got to find him, rescue him, and send him back to 1984.'

The air was shredded by a torrent of noise so loud that the Autobots curled into embryonic balls. The echo waxed and waned for 11 minutes before becoming tolerable.

Nightbeat pointed to four tiny jets on the horizon. 'Phaser, Treadbolt, Blastmaster and... Sunrunner, I think. Heading west.'

'So Siren *is* at home,' murmured Wheeljack. 'Let's go knock on the door.'

Nightbeat checked him. 'It's not as easy as that. Delphi's protected by radial mines, motion-detectors and micro-sensors that can pinpoint imperfections on a rivet.'

'Right. I don't suppose you have a backdoor key, do you?'

*'I look forward to meeting you. Quantax out.'*

Prowl frowned. 'Play it again, Chromedome.'

The communications officer obliged, cranking up the volume so that the Autobots in the corridor outside could hear.

*'This is General Quantax, commander of the Quintesson army, broadcasting to all Autobots. I have your leader. He is frail and near death, but at present maintained by my scientists for use as a torture doll. I imagine you want him back before I break him. The body is stored within our fortress, co-ordinates to follow. I look forward to meeting you. Quantax out.'*

*'This is General Quantax, commander of the—'*

'Switch it off,' snapped Kup. 'Now.'

'It's being broadcast on every frequency,' said Chromedome. 'Looped, too.'

'So it wasn't sent directly to us?' said Prowl.

'No, we just intercepted it. God knows how long it's been out there.'

'Where is this Quintesson fortress?' asked Red Alert.

'According to the co-ordinates, it's in Polyhex, near Darkmount.'

'It's obviously a trick.'

'Obviously. Surely this Quantax knows we'll see through it. What do you think, Kup?' Prowl looked up when no reply came, and the audience split in two. Kup was slipping into the corridor. 'Kup! Where do you think you're going?'

Kup slowly turned. He had not spoken to Prowl since their argument at AMC1 (notwithstanding the torrent of abuse he'd hurled at his commander on coming round; it had taken four Autobots to stop him acting on his threat to kill Prowl 'in ways that would make Galvatron blush'). 'Where am I going? I'm going to get some weapons, then I'm coming back here to recruit a rescue team.'

'You're joking, I take it?'

'There is an excruciatingly high probability that Quantax is luring us into a trap,' said Perceptor.

Kup shrugged. 'I know it's a trap. I'm still getting Prime back. I didn't want to leave him behind in the first place.' He turned to his audience. 'Prowl knocked me out before I could break into Prime's medi-vault.'

'The Quintessons were about to break in,' Prowl found himself saying to the crowd. 'We had no more time. Kup would've been killed.' He resented having to justify his actions in public.

‘Quantax has our leader,’ continued Kup, sensing support among the troops. ‘Are we just going to hide away and do nothing? Or are we going to storm the Quintesson fortress and stuff Quantax’s threats down his throat?’

‘Rodimus is dead,’ said Prowl.

‘We don’t know that!’ Kup seethed.

‘Removing him from the medi-vault would have killed him.’

‘Do we know that for sure? What does everyone else think?’

‘We should try to recover the Matrix...’ Throwback said quietly.

‘The Matrix is long gone!’ snapped Prowl. ‘Quantax probably crushed it the moment he found Rodimus!’

Perceptor shot Prowl a glance that said, ‘Calm down’.

‘Even if Prime is dead,’ concluded Kup, ‘and the Matrix has been smashed to splinters, they have his body. I’m not leaving his corpse in their hands. I’m getting him back. Who’s with me?’

‘No one leaves here without my permission,’ said Prowl firmly. ‘I forbid it. Even if we infiltrated the Quintesson headquarters *en masse*, we’d be slaughtered. So we ignore the message.’

Kup looked at the floor, rubbed his jaw-line, and muttered something behind his hand.

‘Did you say something?’ snapped Prowl.

‘Yes. I said that under the powers vested in me by the Rite of Autobrand I hereby invoke the Crisis Act and demand your resignation.’

The last innocent sound – a footstep, a shuffle, a whisper – was sucked out of the room, leaving only shocked silence.

‘Perceptor can act as balloter and hold the casting vote.’

‘Don’t be stupid, Kup. You can’t do this.’

‘I’m afraid I can, Prowl. Paragraph 17 of the Autobot Code Appeals Procedure says that any Autobot who is for any reason aggrieved by the decision of his superior, if said superior is a ruling member of High Command and said decision can reasonably be construed as acting against the nature and interests of— ’

‘Don’t quote the law to me. I wrote it. Just take the vote and get it over with.’

Kup turned to the crowd. ‘Should Prowl remain in command? Every Autobot has one vote except the acting commander and the complainant. The majority decision holds.’

‘I’m sorry, commander,’ said Perceptor, before beckoning the crowd into an adjourning room.

Prowl moved sideways to let Chromedome exit the room, then sleepwalked to his newest office. He quietly closed the door and began tidying the desk, Kup’s invocation ringing in his ears.

By fighting while in transit, the crews of the Ark and the Enslaver had disobeyed the first rule (possibly the only rule) of subspace travel.

Both spacecraft were frozen against a stark white backdrop, firing at each other. The laserfire registered as dull black cords lashing the ships together. Any damage sustained was neat and crisp and tidy – freshly airbrushed craters were scattered across the hulls.

From the bridge of the Enslaver, Rodern watched his initial salvo draw chunks from the Ark’s underbelly. The next few shots would puncture the defence shields and suck a stream of Cybertronians into non-space. He no longer cared about Xenon, the Quintessons, the New Harvest or even himself. Seeing his enemy dead was all that mattered.

‘Fight!’ he yelled, as if his voice could penetrate the void. ‘Fight back! I didn’t travel halfway across the galaxy for a passive kill!’

In response, the Ark shot a needle of dark energy that lanced the Enslaver’s wing. The Quintessons’ ship had barely survived the transition into hyperspace; it was in no condition to protect itself with force fields or dampener screens. The Bridge lost overhead light and switched to emergency power.

‘That’s more like it!’ Rodern grinned, picking himself up off the floor. ‘Retaliate! Full power!’

Silverbolt’s hands danced across innumerable control keys. ‘Ultra Magnus, every time we – Hubcap! Grid failure! – every time we open fire we’re draining essential energy reservoirs.’

‘What else can we do? Sit here and get shot at?’

The walls of the Bridge were lined with Autobots hogging navigation and communication ports, each one obsolete. Red lights studded the ceiling and the overhead monitors registered a thousand damage reports.

Silverbolt stared through the view-screen at the endless lime-grey bodywork of the Quintesson warcruiser. ‘They’re coming closer,’ he said, pulling the targeting visor from his head and throwing it to his leader. ‘Take over.’

‘What are you doing?’ Magnus spluttered, slipping into the vacated chair.

‘Going outside.’

Silverbolt picked his team as he walked through the crowd (‘Air Raid, Skydive, Slingshot, Broadside...’) and a parade of Autobot flyers followed him, without comment, into the vacuum lift.

Rodern watched a stream of Cybertronians emerge from a disembarkation tunnel underneath the Ark. Ten jets powered towards his ship, dissipating like fireworks. This was not what he had envisaged.

‘Release the Tridents,’ he ordered, wringing his hands. ‘Tackle them head-on.’

‘Hangar doors are off-line, sir.’

The Enslaver shuddered against the first wave of close-quarters fire.

Silverbolt plunged towards the Enslaver, hurling himself away from eddying trails of loose wreckage. It felt different out here, smoother and more fluid, as if the void had stretched him into a beam of light. He scanned the flame-warped Quintesson architecture, unloaded a flak-pack from his fuselage, ignited fast-burn and peeled away. A modest explosion punctured the outer hull and swelled into a full-blown chain reaction. ‘Pull back, Autobots,’ he snapped via intercom, and led the retreat.

Rodern ignored the departing Autobots: his ship was dying from the inside. Lights chattered, flared and cancelled out – the explosion was threading every curve of the ship and burrowing inwards. He looked around the empty room. Sophisticated scanners and computers turned into slabs of grey under his Medusan gaze.

He stumbled into the corridor and into the path of a careering fireball.

From the bridge of the Ark, Ultra Magnus and Death’s Head watched the Enslaver blink out of existence.

Siren and Nightbeat embraced.

‘The prodigal son returns,’ said Siren, pulling away with a smile. ‘I knew you’d get homesick in Iacon.’

‘You know me, I hate the big city.’ But Nightbeat’s grin was not reflected in his eyes, and he quickly abandoned any pretence of levity. ‘It’s all gone to hell, Siren. Everything.’

‘Quintessons. We saw the public broadcast.’

‘It’s a different planet out there,’ said Wheeljack, shaking Siren’s hand as if he were a foreign ambassador. He glanced about Delphi’s foyer, counting guardsmen and Micromasters.

‘If you’re looking for any other Autobot émigrés, you’ll be disappointed. You four are the only contact we’ve had with the outside world for days.’

The engineer looked downcast. ‘What about Ultra Magnus? Prowl?’

‘We haven’t made any contact with High Command since—’

‘Excuse me,’ called Sygnet from the back of the foyer. ‘But is anyone going to tell these goons to get their guns out my face?’

‘Who’s the Decepticon?’ asked Siren evenly.

‘Sygnet,’ said Wheeljack. ‘He’s with us. He used to be an Autobot – my apprentice. Remember?’

‘Vaguely.’ Siren approached the robot in question, gesturing for Fastlane and Pincher to lower their weapons. ‘So what are you now, Sygnet? An Autobot or a Decepticon?’

Sygnet patted the purple badge on his chest. ‘Three guesses.’

‘And this is Centurion,’ said Mainframe. ‘He was built on Earth.’

Centurion nodded at the Autobots closest to him, Autobots he would come to know as Camshaft, Dogfight, Swerve, Darkstar, Terris and Zetar. He was momentarily struck by the giant humans loitering in

the corner, then remembered Hound's history lessons – these were the Pretenders Pincher, Splashdown and Sky High.

'Quite a motley crew you've assembled, Nightbeat,' said Siren without smiling. 'But I'm glad you're all here.'

'Seems Delphi's the only sanctuary we have left. Do you realise what's happening out there?'

A few minutes later, the main players were comparing notes in Delphi's only office. Wheeljack recounted the battle for Autobot City, the activation and relocation of Metroplex and the size and nature of the Quintesson army. Siren used Raindance's surveillance footage to detail the Polyhex massacre, the concentration camp in Mt Edeus and the paralysing microchips. Finally – painfully – Nightbeat described the holistic wormhole and gave an abridged version of his mission to 'borrow' the Optimus Prime of 1984.

'Where is he now?' Siren asked, once the initial incredulity had passed.

'I don't know. He can't be dead. God knows what would happen if the Quintessons killed him.'

'Are we talking rifts?'

'Yeah. Space-time Rifts. Capital R. We have to get him back.'

'If you ask me,' said Wheeljack, 'the whole idea of "borrowing" Optimus was insane in the first place. He's not some mekanid you can take off the shelf, plug in and discard when used. He was a real person. He was Optimus Prime, for god's sake!'

'Is Optimus Prime. Present tense, please.' Nightbeat rubbed his eyes in an affectation of tiredness. 'And don't think I didn't raise these questions before accepting the mission.'

'I'm sorry, Nightbeat. It's just... I knew him, you know? I served under him for years. Seeing him again, in whatever context, feels somewhat unnatural.'

'If it's any consolation, I wish I'd destroyed the wormhole.'

'What about Prowl? What about Autobase?'

'No contact for three days,' said Siren. 'Last we heard, they were expecting a Quintesson attack. We were told not to intervene. I think they might be dead.'

'So we really are the only ones left. How long before they find us?'

'Fastlane intercepted a message from a Quintesson called Quantax. He said he had Rodimus Prime's body and gave us the co-ordinates of the Quintessons' Polyhex HQ.'

'They've obviously murdered Rodimus,' said Wheeljack, surprised at how casually he spoke.

'I agree. They're trying to draw us out. It's a trap.'

'For you?' Nightbeat looked up. 'Or for someone else?'

'I don't follow.'

'I'm guessing that Quantax didn't send you his ransom message direct. He doesn't know where you're hiding, so the transmission was wide. It was a global call-out, available to anyone. What if we aren't the only ones left? What if this Quintesson is trying to pinpoint a different team of Autobots? Have you tried to make contact with Prowl, Siren?'

'Obviously. But they haven't replied.'

'The difficulty,' said Wheeljack, 'would lie in calling you without Quintesson detection. All we can do is wait for the signal.'

The klaxons took them by surprise. The three of them dashed into a corridor that was already full of Autobots running towards the foyer, ready to meet the Quintesson threat head-on. The hologramatic entrance dissolved and the front-liners levelled their weapons; but there was no army outside, just one robot. He was hobbling forward, oblivious to the danger.

'Hold fire!' screamed Nightbeat. 'You don't know what you're doing!' He broke into the open and grabbed the half-dead intruder. 'This is Optimus Prime! The *real* Optimus Prime! Drop your weapons and get me some medical assistance! *Now!*'

How long does it take to raise your hand? How long does it take to say 'For' or 'Against?'

These questions, in various permutations, had been filtering through Prowl's microprocessors since the moment he'd sat down and started setting data-boards straight. He had barely glanced at the latest paperwork (which included a disturbing report from Throwback about viral labs in the bowels of the Institute), preferring to stare into space. Palms flat on a spotless surface, spinal strut rigidly straight, he eyeballed the office door and waited; waited for his men to decide his fate; waited for a decision on his

leadership, his career, his life. Nothing else registered. The Quintesson invasion had ended the moment Kup invoked the Crisis Act. The planet had shrunk to a single room as soon as he'd closed the door.

224 Autobots, 28 of whom were off-line. Excluding himself and the appellant, that left an electorate of 194: Afterburner thru Vroom.

Calculations rattled around his head. He had the ability to observe eight hundred moving objects, compute their probable paths of movement, and determine the proper countermove in 0.05 seconds, yet he was incapable of second-guessing a single Autobot vote. It was only now, crossing off their names in his head, that he realised how little he knew about his troops.

How had it come to this? He'd progressed from chartered surveyor to a member of The Five (Circuit One's band of special Autobots) to criminal profiler (Mechaforensics Division) to Optimus Prime's treasured advisor in a few thousand years. But ever since the attempt on Rodimus Prime's life, back at Diosys, things had been falling apart. Everything around him was crumbling, and he was crumbling too...

Autobots walked past his office. Throwback, Volt, Hotrider, Quark, Rev-Tone, Skram. Others followed. No one looked at him. No one spoke.

Perceptor stepped into the office and closed the door behind him. Prowl had rehearsed a thousand scathing opening lines, but in the event could only manage a barely audible 'Well?'

'108 to 86.'

'In whose favour?'

'Yours. Kup lost the appeal.'

'I see.'

Prowl stood up, stepped outside, and headed in a direction opposite to that travelled by the other Autobots. He was thinking only one thing:

*86 against?*

'Five quads of millitine solution, a plasteen burn unit and some microscalpels! Charge the circuit-slab and hook up the tethene lube drip – we have widespread puncture wounds! Looks like a noidal break on the left flank.'

Optimus Prime lay unconscious on the stretcher and dripped lubricant on Delphi's clean white corridors as he was pushed towards the medi-lab. The medical entourage swarmed around him and exchanged glances. Cloudraker held an energon pack in either hand and gave orders, his expression flickering with disbelief every time he looked at the patient.

'What's happened to him?' shouted Nightbeat, fighting for a place at Prime's side. 'Is he going to be all right? Why isn't he conscious?'

'Someone get Nightbeat out of here!' shouted Cloudraker.

Siren slipped inside the ring of medics, synchronised his pace with theirs and looped his arm around Nightbeat's shoulder. 'You're in the way, 'Beat – come on.'

Nightbeat dropped back and watched the medics disappear around a corner.

'It's really him, isn't it,' said Siren, looking at Nightbeat with fresh understanding. 'It really is.'

'And there is absolutely no trace of the Quintesson ship?' repeated Ultra Magnus.

'None whatsoever. We can locate debris that were knocked loose in battle, but the actual ship – nothing.' Silverbolt looked up to check that the door was closed. He could hear the celebrations on the bridge, the back-slaps and hand-claps and cheers of support for his triumphant team.

'I don't get it,' said Mirage. 'Surely we should be able to detect fuel emissions or a burnout signature?'

'It is possible that the Quintesson ship wasn't completely destroyed. If its trans-warp generator was hit, it would have materialised in regular space in mid-explosion.'

Mirage looked from Silverbolt to Ultra Magnus. 'There's something else, isn't there? Something you're not telling me.'

'Our own trans-warp generator is operating at 45% efficiency; any lower and we too will be forced back into reg-space.'

'How long will it take to get to Cybertron?'

‘Via hyperspace?’ Silverbolt counted on his fingers. ‘About an hour. If we phase back into reg-space... maybe one, two days.’

‘We don’t have the luxury of choice,’ said Ultra Magnus. ‘We break out of hyperspace immediately.’

The Quintesson guardsman Q-6 sat in the corner of Haxian’s workshop and savoured a feeling quite alien to his emotional make-up: self-satisfaction. Several weeks ago he had feigned an internal rust rash to avoid being selected for General Rodern’s strike force. Excluding Haxian’s scientists, Ferrax and the Cargo (which didn’t really count – not yet, anyway) he was one of only a handful of troopers staying behind on Aquaria while the Imperial Armies conquered Cybertron.

But evading conscription was only the first part: Xenon was now looking for volunteers to transport a sample of *aqua fortis* to New Quintyxia. All of the original teleporteers had died shortly after their interstellar leap. When the cry went up for another, he had told Haxian that his fellow shift-worker, Q-12, was eager to get involved with the war campaign.

He watched Haxian prepare the bulky telearmour while Q-12 grew less and less enthusiastic. Watching a soldier count down to certain death was far more entertaining than guarding Aquaria’s prison population. Last time he had checked, the sole surviving inmate – a Cybertronian leader, apparently – was hanging on the wall shouting his own name.

A particularly plaintive scream ended with Haxian slamming his scalpel onto the work surface. He stared at Q-6 through his goggles. “I can’t work with Galvatron making all that noise. Go and shut him up!”

Q-6 snapped to attention, slung the pulse rifle over his shoulder and marched into the corridor, annoyed that he might miss Q-12’s last words.

The noise had stopped by the time he had reached the cell.

It was empty.

He swept a torch beam over the far wall, hoping that it would graze a body in the corner and the nightmare scenario would suddenly correct itself. There was something in the corner, but it was only a mound of commingling metal: Thunderclash and Longtooth had become a hybrid corpse, their torsos looped like magician’s rings. Galvatron was nowhere to be seen.

Q-6 looked around, suddenly afraid. The corridor was empty; there was no half-glimpsed movement, no shift in the shadows. With his plasma rifle still propped against his shoulder, he shut down the cell bars and stepped inside. He could find no sign of a forced exit. He unhooked his communicator and went to call Haxian, but a noise froze his fingers. He fumbled for his rifle.

The noise had come from the bodies in the corner. He crouched to inspect the mix ‘n’ match torsos, wondering whether one of them, against all odds, was still operative. Thunderclash’s chest was gaping and hollow. There was no way *this* one could be alive, he thought, bending closer.

Galvatron burst from Thunderclash’s chest, transforming from gun mode to robot mode. He plucked the guard from the floor, drove a fist through his chest, grabbed the plasma rifle and ducked into the corridor, wondering which way to head.

Having landed a safe distance away from the foot of Mount Novum, the four Micromasters were continuing their journey to the deserted Manganesian Autobase on foot. Sunrunner led the way, waving a navigation console as if it were a pathblaster.

‘According to Siren’s co-ordinates,’ he said, looking up at a blank cliff face, ‘the entrance to Fortress Maximus’ old pad is right about here.’

Phaser grabbed the navi-console. ‘I knew you couldn’t read maps,’ he grumbled. ‘You’ve probably had this thing upside-down the whole time.’

Blastmaster ran his hands over the bronzed mountain wall. ‘You two don’t get out of Delphi much, do you? I was posted here back when I was an FS – had some interesting times.’

‘You were a full-sizer?’ said Sunrunner, snatching the naviguide back. ‘When did you have the op?’

‘1990, a few months after Xaaron’s Scaledown Charter. Shot down near Ibex. They didn’t have enough materials to rebuild, so I opted for the snip.’

‘It’s always the ones you least expect, isn’t it? I’m a first generation Micro, Flame-born and bred – hey! Where’s Blastmaster?’

‘Inside.’ Blastmaster’s head and shoulders emerged from the cliff face as if he was rising from the sea. ‘One good holo-wall is better than a thousand feet of steel. Where d’you think Delphi got the idea from?’

They went inside. Autobase was stripped bare. Maximus had peeled away not just the computer hardware, but the worktops, seats and doorframes. Everything had been recycled for use aboard the Steelhaven, preventing any shred of technology from falling into enemy hands. All that remained were support arches and corridor struts. Glimmers of moulded steel mingled with untreated metal, as if Mount Novum was slowly and patiently reclaiming lost ground.

The Micromasters crossed a glassy surface daubed with streaks of red, unaware that they were walking over an enormous Autobot symbol, and found a metal grille bolted to the wall some distance above their heads.

Blastmaster craned his neck. ‘I wonder how many times I passed this thing by without paying it any attention. Funny how time lends a different perspective.’

After half an hour of crawling on all fours through nondescript metal ducts Sunrunner said, ‘Congratulations, team. We’ve crossed over into Mount Edeus.’

‘Incredible,’ said Treadbolt, right behind him. ‘This duct looks just as shiny and cramped as those inside Mount Novum.’

Sunrunner tapped the naviguide. ‘This thing doesn’t lie. We’re officially inside enemy territory.’

‘Technically, Sunrunner, the whole of Cybertron is now enemy territory.’

‘We mustn’t think like that,’ said Phaser. ‘I suggest we increase stealth fields and communicate via inter-Autobot radio. Agreed?’

‘Agreed.’

After another few minutes of crouch and crawl, Blastmaster found a second grille. Signalling for extreme caution, he folded himself tight against the slats and gave enough space for Sunrunner to do the same.

‘What can you see’ asked Phaser.

‘Prison cells. I think we’re on the ground floor.’

‘Is there anyone inside the cells?’

‘Yeah. Decepticons.’

‘You okay, Blastmaster?’

‘By the Matrix - what have they done?’

‘Don’t move,’ warned Haxian, standing back to admire his handiwork. The vials of *aqua fortis* had been securely attached to Q-12’s bulging control belt. When the tele-trooper shuffled, so did the folds of interconnected armour. The floor shuddered and Haxian tapped the telearmour with his drill. ‘I said keep still! I haven’t finished yet.’

‘With respect sir, I didn’t do anything.’

Haxian straightened his back and looked Q-12 in the eye. ‘Don’t talk back. You flex a joint under there and the suit responds. It’s a very sensitive piece of equipment.’

‘But sir...’

‘I’ve set the co-ordinates for Cyber— for New Quintyxia. Ryknia, Sevax and Jolup will meet you on arrival.’ He paused, admiring the telearmour’s dark sheen. ‘Look, remove this suit as soon as you arrive. Rest and recharge. Don’t let them put you to work straight away. Speak to Ryknia, he’s the most reasonable.’

There was a noise: a tumble of heavy footsteps outside the lab. Haxian frowned and reached for his weapon.

Galvatron dived into the lab and rolled across the floor. Haxian ducked behind a workbench as gunfire flew over his head.

‘Drop your weapon and stand up,’ ordered Galvatron. ‘You have three seconds before I—’

Haxian’s pistol skidded feebly across the floor. He stood up, hands above his head, face half-turned, as if he expected to be shot immediately. He saw that Q-12’s head had snapped back like a severed spring. A bullet wound sizzled on his helmet.

Galvatron jabbed his gun at the dead teletrooper. 'He abducted me and brought me here. Are you the one that sent him?'

'He isn't – wasn't – your abductor. What do you want, Galvatron?'

'Freedom. Help me escape.' Galvatron pressed his gun barrel against Haxian's forehead. 'Help me escape or I'll kill you.'

Moments later, with Q-12 dumped in the corner, Haxian attached the final piece of telearmour onto Galvatron's body. Throughout the operation, Galvatron had retained his laser rifle – even now, as Haxian reached around his neck to fuse the final set of clamps, he could feel the barrel against his stomach.

'And this is programmed to take me home?'

'Right back to New Quin— back to Cybertron.'

'I don't believe you, of course. You could program it to materialise anywhere – next to a sun as it goes nova, or inside a black hole. That's why I'm taking you with me.'

Haxian backed away, hands automatically in the air. 'I haven't set it for additional mass.'

'Convenient.' Galvatron raised his weapon and felt the bodysuit bend and flex in time with his limbs. 'Come over here.'

'No.' Haxian dropped instantly, expecting the shot – it exploded against an alarm pad on the other side of the lab. Galvatron shrugged, shot Haxian in the chest, and walked into the corridor. Sharkticons were already pouring out of nearby doorways.

A different Galvatron would have stood his ground and tackled his pursuers; a different Galvatron would have rubbed his knuckles and got to work. But this Galvatron was low on energy and roped into a constrictive suit of subspace armour; this Galvatron was suffering the slow, insidious effects of a warped Inhibitor Chip. This Galvatron ran.

He turned another corner: more Sharkticons. He realised, too late, that the corridors were like wheel spokes, and that he was trapped near the hub. He ducked into a side-passage. The suit weighed heavily on him, like wet clothes. He fumbled with the belt controls and tumbled blindly on, voices and laserfire close behind. What would happen if they recaptured him? Another Inhibitor Chip? Could he override the mechrobe a second time?

He ran towards a dead end and felt pinpricks of heat all over his body: the telearmour was powering up. He drummed the control pad, hoping that one precious key would activate the subspace jump and whisk him away. He was enveloped in a buttery glow. The walls liquefied and collapsed, white light dashed his eyes and he fell to his knees, defeated, blind and mad with pain.

Sunrunner and Blastmaster could not believe what they had just seen: a hulking robot had phased into the prison foyer in a storm of bruised light and sound. The robot's red-hot knees cratered the floor and smoke escaped his throbbing shoulders.

*'That's not a warp-gate,'* said Sunrunner eventually, still talking to the other Micromasters via inter-Autobot radio. *'Maybe some kind of... some kind of – I don't know what's just happened.'*

They moved closer to the grille as two Quintesson wardens descended the stairs. Between them, shuffling like children, were five red Decepticons, their eyes fixed only on the next stair. When their captors broke off to inspect the new arrival, the prisoners simply stopped moving.

Galvatron's sight returned slowly, as if every optic fibre was being reconstituted. He blinked at the floor, at his gloved hands, at the thousands of cells stretching upward into oblivion. The two Quintessons sloped into view and started talking to him, celebrating his arrival, mumbling into their wrists about liquid samples and deadlines. Galvatron stood up, killed them with swift punches to the head, and tore off his helmet.

*'What the hell is he doing here?'* said Sunrunner. *'What's happened to his body?'*

Galvatron started to undress, peeling off the layers of warm telearmour and inspecting his own blistered skin. He studied the headless Quintessons and for a moment questioned the success of his escape: had he simply teleported to another part of the Aquarian base?

Sunrunner shifted his weight and glanced at the others. Quintessons he could handle; Quintessons he had expected. Captive Autobots, captive Decepticons – all part of the plan. But Galvatron? He'd never even seen Galvatron before, not in the flesh.

*'What do we do?'*

*'How about nothing?'* Phaser buzzed back. *'We sit still, shut up and observe, just like Siren told us to do.'*

*'Nothing sounds good to me,'* said Treadbolt.



Galvatron stepped out of his boots and noticed the stair-dwelling Decepticons for the first time. 'Fearswoop! Nightracer! Megaplex!' None of them looked up. 'Where am I? What is this place?' He ran to the nearest, grabbed him by the throat and hoisted him aloft. 'Look at me, Nightracer! What's happening?' The prisoner's eyes glistened like wet coal. Galvatron cast him aside and watched reinforcements run along the upper balconies.

*'They've all been drugged,'* concluded Blastmaster *'It's the paralysis chip, like Raindance said.'*

Galvatron suddenly realised how tired he felt. Slipping offline seemed almost tempting. 'What have you done to my men?' he yelled at the Sharkticons reinforcements. 'You've turned them into drones! You should have killed them!'

The guards managed a few shots before they too were disarmed and kicked to the floor. The pile of telearmour skidded towards the grille, almost blocking the Micromasters' view. A metal box split apart and released a dozen small vials.

Galvatron, meanwhile, slowly succumbed to the blows and blasts. When he could take no more, hope arrived: three heavily armed Decepticons dropped into the arena from the balcony above. Unlike Nightracer, these three were alert and attentive.

'Galvatron, I presume,' smiled Jolup, who pulled the guards away with a wave of his shok baton. 'Xenon said you might be dropping by.' He looked at two red Decepticons spread-eagled on the floor having been hit by stray bullets. 'I see you met some Reddies. You meet one, you meet them all.'

'Who are you?'

'We are the governors of this institution,' said Ryknia.

'You've betrayed your race, and for what? A little power?'

The guards pinned Galvatron in place. He struggled, cursed his weakness, and spat on the floor. 'You're beneath my contempt. You are no longer Decepticons.'

'We've never been Decepticons,' Jolup muttered, pulling a syringe gun from his holster. 'We just use their bodies.' He held the gun to the light and found the Inhibitor Chip among the liquid solution. Galvatron struggled, snapping his head back to shield his neural cluster.

'Teleporting millions of light years just isn't good for you,' continued Jolup, tapping the shaft and watching bubbles collapse. 'The strongest trooper can only make the jump once or twice. Now hold still for your injection.' He pulled Galvatron's head down and exposed the neck. 'This won't hurt a bit...'

Galvatron transformed into his laser gun mode, snapping free from the guards as he did so. The changeover registered as a sudden burst of silver-grey; in an instant, Jolup and the guards had been scattered across the floor.

'Careful,' said Ryknia, as the guards closed in on Galvatron's alternate form. 'We don't want him pulling that trick again.'

'I thought Xenon had chipped him!' spat Jolup. He noticed Ryknia's frown and added, 'I was injecting him for the hell of it! I didn't think he could transform!' Retrieving the syringe gun, he stormed past the tiptoeing guard and stamped on Galvatron. Upset at the lack of visible damage, he brought his foot down a second time.

'Just inject him,' Ryknia sighed. 'He's out cold.'

'Where the hell's his neural cluster?' he said, holding the gun at arm's length. 'Damn these alternate modes!' He plunged the needle, sank the chip, and threw Galvatron aside. The Decepticon spun across the floor and hit the wall grille. Sunrunner looked at the others.

'This concerns me,' said Sevax, folding his arms. 'What if Galvatron was chipped and it... I don't know, it wore off?'

Ryknia was already shaking his head. 'It doesn't work like that. The Inhibitor chip is a permanent, incurable virus. If anything, it gets worse over time.'

'He speaks as if he invented the damn thing,' Jolup muttered, rubbing his aching head. 'I say we contact Xenon and get an explanation. What if we have a mass uprising on our hands?'

'Okay, we'll speak to Xenon after we've taken Galvatron Downstairs.'

Jolup was already searching amongst the Sharkticons and the telearmour wreckage. 'He's gone!'

'Not funny,' said Sevax, slightly uneasy. 'You dropped him over there, by the wall duct.'

The three of them looked at the displaced grille lying underneath a hole in the wall.

'Impossible!' snapped Ryknia. 'The gun didn't sprout little legs and escape through a hole in the wall!'

‘Well he wasn’t taken, was he – no one could fit inside that duct!’

‘You’re wrong, Jolup. I’ve seen some mini-Cybertronians on D-wing. Perhaps there are more of them out there.’

‘They might still be in the shafts!’

Sevax barked into his wrist communicator: ‘I want all perimeter squads to purge the network of maintenance ducts and—’

‘Full-flame cleansing!’ shouted Ryknia. ‘Nothing escapes!’ He knelt beside the open duct and peered inside. ‘We’ll *roast* them...’

Chromedome and Perceptor strolled down the Institute’s outer corridor, deep in conversation. To their right were rows of padlocked doors, each blocking a long-abandoned tech-lab or workshop. To their left were sloped panes of glass, cracked by ceaseless blister-winds. As they walked towards the science block, they crushed already broken glass underfoot.

‘Why the B/332?’ asked Perceptor. ‘Surely there are more efficient frequency calibrators?’

‘I dare say there are – on Hydrus 4. The only way I’m going to get our transmitter working is with a 332. This place hasn’t been lived in for millennia. I’m working with museum pieces. The com-banks downstairs are fine for mid-range transmissions but they need to be upgraded if we’re to go global. Besides, we’re not just sending a distress signal to all and sundry. We’re being selective.’

Chromedome stretched his servos. It was peaceful out here, away from the Quintessons, away from the other Autobots. A slight corruption of the ocular filters was all it took to smudge the bullet holes, smooth the walls and restore the Institute to its former glory. He remembered heading towards lectures while chattering scholars slipped in and out of sunlight, in and out of rooms. He’d been happy here.

‘How’s Prowl doing?’ he asked at length, having been alone with his memories for too long.

‘I don’t know. I haven’t seen him since... you know.’

‘You think he’s upset about the leadership thing?’

‘It would certainly seem so. To suffer the Crisis Act... Even Grimlock escaped that.’

‘So why did you vote against him?’

Perceptor chose his words even more carefully than normal. ‘Prowl... is a good lieutenant. In fact I would venture that in that capacity he is the most efficient and level-headed Autobot I have ever worked with.’

‘But he’s no leader, right?’

‘He is being rash, and not thinking clearly... I was hoping for a change in command.’

‘And who do you think should lead?’

Perceptor pointed to a stairway. ‘Where does this go?’

‘To a downloading theatre. I used to come here for lessons on forced probability. Come on.’

A flight of stairs led from the entrance door to the floor, dissecting rows of seats and worktops. On floor level was an upturned chair, folded projection units and a lustreless monitor screen. Hollowed computers were stacked against the screen in what looked like a half-hearted attempt to conceal the gaping hole in one corner.

Perceptor descended the stairs while Chromedome took a seat and tapped a dead keyboard. ‘This was my place,’ he said, scanning the room from an old perspective. ‘Brainstorm and Highbrow sat over there.’

Perceptor just nodded, preoccupied by the junk at the bottom of the stairs.

‘Optimus Prime lectured here once, Perceptor. Well, it was more of a recruitment drive than a lecture. He stood where you are now and explained that the civil war was about to explode and that every Autobot was needed for the cause. Hey, what did you just put down?’

‘It’s a Series 2 BW modifier. Not what you’re looking for.’

‘Give it here,’ said Chromedome, meeting Perceptor mid-way on the stairs.

‘You said you wanted a B/332.’

‘I did, I did, but this might do the trick... Look, it has v-wave sockets and bi-locational node capacity.’

‘Hmm, most irregular. Do you recall using teleportation equipment here?’

‘In the Institute? No.’ Chromedome looked himself over in the broken monitor screen. ‘Did you ever lecture here, Perceptor?’

'No, not here.' He prised the box open. 'This modifier has been tampered with. It belongs to a primitive matter transporter, possibly even a short-span teleport hatch.'

'Uh-huh.' Chromedome crouched opposite the screen and peered behind the mound of old computers.

'Are you listening to me, Chromedome? I believe this component was cannibalised from some sort of teleporter. Here. In this Institute.'

'Come here,' said Chromedome quietly, unlatching his weapon. 'Look behind the glass. There's something in there.'

A robot was slumped in shadow behind the shattered monitor screen. Perceptor peered closer.

'Soundwave?'

Ryknia entered the control room to find Sevax and Jolup seated at the conference table, staring at their hands as if grappling with bad news.

Jolup looked up. 'Well?'

'Xenon says that Galvatron is the exception that proves the rule. He's built from a different stock to the rest of his race. Very advanced. Haxian will modify the chip as soon as he's back on his feet.' Ryknia sat down. 'I told Xenon that we'd killed Galvatron. There was no point bringing the downsized Cybertronians into it.'

'Are we safe in here?' asked Sevax.

'Like I said, Xenon thinks Galvatron's one of a kind. The regular Cybertronians shouldn't prove a problem. Besides, if any of them could break the program, they'd have done so by now.'

'We had an escapee yesterday,' grunted Jolup. 'Transformed into a jet.'

'I've looked into that. He was hooked up to a Cybertronian we didn't chip. He managed to break off and get through the bars.'

'Well I don't like it,' said Sevax.

'Tough. Get over it. We're finding out more about the Cybes as we go along. I've told the welcoming committee to double-chip if in doubt.'

'But two breakouts in two days...'

'What doesn't kill us makes us stronger.'

'Shame the same can't be said of the Reddies,' Jolup smirked. 'The Inhibitor Chips have really kicked in now. The Grade Cs are like zombies.'

Sevax shot Jolup a dark look. 'This isn't funny. We'd be slaughtered if they overrode the Inhibitor. Something else has been bothering me, too: why didn't Galvatron recognise us? Why hasn't *anybody* recognised us? None of the prisoners have called us by our "real" names, whatever they are.'

'Xenon intercepted our host bodies over Aquaria,' said Ryknia slowly, 'but he never interrogated them. Perhaps they never served under Galvatron. Perhaps they deserted the Decepticon army years ago.'

'So why were they passing Aquaria? Coincidence?'

'I'm sorry, Sevax, but I have to ask who – apart from you – really gives a damn? It doesn't matter who we used to be. Our predecessors are dead.'

Soundwave had been dumped on a table and laid out like a corpse, as if doing so would reassure the crowd of Autobots that he was harmless. Prowl, Perceptor and Red Alert stood beside him like family members.

Rev-Tone could stand the silence no longer. 'So what are we going to do with him?'

Everyone spoke at once, offering his viewpoint without listening to anyone else's. Prowl let the noise crash around him, too tired to intervene. He found himself trying to discern the majority view and hated himself for doing so. He stared at Kup, who was talking to Chromedome and waving his gun around.

'I say we revive him,' said Prowl quietly. 'He might have information.'

The other voices died away.

Kup rested his weapon on Soundwave's chest. 'I don't think I caught that. You said you wanted to revive him?'

'Don't even start, Kup. I've had enough. We're going to save Soundwave.'

‘I agree, actually. Revive him.’

Prowl bit back his surprise, and Autobots who had just now argued against repairing the Decepticon looked to one another for support. Without someone as vocal as Kup to stand against Prowl, they lacked confidence.

‘I don’t argue against you for the sake of it,’ continued Kup. ‘I argue when I think you’re wrong. I say revive him.’

‘And I say it’s not that simple,’ interrupted Red Alert, who had been poring over the Decepticon’s body while High Command locked horns. ‘Soundwave cannot be reactivated without energon. Those in favour of revival will have to donate a portion of their own fuel.’

The naysayers had walked off before Red Alert had finished speaking. Kup loitered by the body, shook his head and left without another word. The other Autobots, detecting the seismic shift in mood, followed him, leaving only Prowl and Red Alert.

Prowl looked at the retreating ranks. ‘I’ll do it. Prepare the transfer, Red Alert. I don’t have much to spare.’

Chromedome was the first back inside. ‘I’ll give something.’ Throwback, Getaway and Highbeam pledged their support. Others returned to witness the transfusion.

In the corridor outside, Kup smiled to himself and ticked another four names off his list.

Nightbeat and Siren stood in the viewing gallery overlooking Delphi’s medical chamber. Down below, Optimus Prime’s body sizzled quietly beneath the diced and filtered light.

Cloudraker tidied rows of instruments while Sunrunner, Treadbolt, Phaser and Blastmaster limped away, having been given the all clear. The Micromasters had escaped Kledji with only minor burns, but it had been close (it was always close). As they left, they could not resist a peek at Optimus Prime.

Siren watched them exit the chamber and remembered the frenzy of their return home. Armed guards had ferried an offline Galvatron, locked in gun mode, to the science labs and put him under lock and key. ‘I can’t believe we’ve captured him,’ he said to Nightbeat. ‘Four Micromasters succeed where High Command has failed for seven years.’

‘It’s certainly a feather in Delphi’s cap, even if it wasn’t a fair fight.’

‘So you’ve read Blastmaster’s report?’

‘No. But you know how word gets around.’

‘Galvatron teleported into the concentration camp and was injected with a paralysis chip. The Micros saw it all. What’s so funny?’

‘Nothing. It’s just that another Micromaster, Emyrissus, witnessed Galvatron’s abduction in the first place.’

‘Where was he taken?’

‘Who knows? Probably some off-world headquarters – the Quintessons’ real base of operations, wherever that is.’

‘Until we know more about them, Nightbeat, we’re facing an infinite enemy. Who knows what percentage of the Quintesson army is on Cybertron? There could be millions of reinforcements waiting in the wings.’

‘I don’t know if “reinforcements” is the right word, not anymore. “Colonists” would be more applicable.’

As soon as Red Alert had finished the transfusion, Soundwave was carried into a makeshift cell. Prowl stood in the corner, screwing his hand back into place while Throwback, Getaway and Chromedome trained their weapons on the Decepticon’s twitching body. Funny, he thought, how Autobots who were prepared to shoot and kill were those who, moments earlier, had donated a portion of their energy to save Soundwave’s life.

Soundwave fidgeted on the workbench and made clicking and whirring noises, lost in the throes of pseudo-shutdown. His optics fizzed behind his visor as he adjusted to the new environment. ‘Autobots,’ he said, half to himself, and with a strange weariness. ‘Who’s in charge here?’

‘I am,’ said Prowl, stepping out of the shadows. ‘We repaired you. You’re under arrest.’

Soundwave saw the laser pistols and raised his hands. 'I'm unarmed.'

Prowl waved Throwback and Getaway aside. They hovered by the door, reluctant to holster their weapons.

'Where am I, Prowl? Autobase?'

Prowl sketched the situation as briefly as he could, recounting the fall of Iacon but skipping the AMC interlude. 'We're camping inside the Institute for Higher Programming until we can make contact with other pockets of resistance.'

'Ah. And there I was thinking you had revived me out of compassion. All you want is a glorified cassette deck.' Soundwave pointed to his dented chest. 'Sorry, but your efforts were wasted. I cannot send nor receive messages in this condition.'

'You're a liar, Soundwave.'

'Prove it.'

Prowl was at a loss. In the corridor outside, dozens of Autobots waited for a reply, a wisecrack, a cutting remark, but he did not specialise in these things. He simply nodded to Soundwave's injury and asked, 'What happened to you?'

'The Quintessons carpet-bombed Polyhex. I was caught near the front line, and transformed before the cluster bombs hit. The bombing had opened fissures in the ground, and I fell into the ducts... I planned to get as far away from Polyhex as possible, but the fall left me damaged. The fact that I made it this far before burning out is a miracle.'

'Where were you heading?' Prowl asked, having sensed Soundwave's hesitation. 'Towards other Decepticons? Are there any more of you out there?'

'No. We were all stationed in Polyhex.'

'Then I'm afraid you're the last of your kind. The last free Decepticon.'

'I'd hardly call this freedom.'

'There are worse places to be,' said Prowl. 'Like facedown in a downloading theatre.' He closed the cell door and stepped back as Getaway attached a coded lock.

'The last of my kind, you say?' Soundwave called from inside. 'Now that the Quintessons have taken over, is there really any difference between Autobot and Decepticon?'

Prowl activated the lock. 'Oh yes.'

Jolup burst into the control room, shok baton in one hand, plasma rifle in the other. He found Sevax sitting at the conference table opposite three red, headless Decepticons and a smoking pistol. 'I heard gunshots! What happened? More escapees?'

'I released them,' mumbled Sevax, looking at the splattered oil and circuitry slipping down the wall. 'For interrogation purposes.'

'You what?'

'They were high-rankers. Squad leaders or lieutenants, I think.'

'What was all that about "negating rank" and "bleaching out personalities"?''

Sevax cocked his weapon half-seriously at Jolup's head. 'Don't start. I thought they might know about us – about our bodies, anyway.'

'And you didn't like what they had to say?'

'Quite the opposite, in fact. If they knew anything, they didn't talk. I threatened to blow their heads off unless they told me everything they knew about us.' He mimed each kill-shot. 'Nothing. Not a thing. It makes you wonder.'

'Correction: it makes *you* wonder.'

'They had guns to their heads and they still couldn't remember a single thing about us.'

'You're taking this whole thing too seriously. It doesn't matter who these bodies belonged to before we moved in. It's all in the past. Life began when we left Aquaria.'

Sevax shrugged. 'What are you doing back here, anyway? I thought you were running the recycling site.'

'Boring. I left Q-362 in charge. The Grade As are making good progress, although a few have been smelted. Accidentally, of course. Don't look at me like that – you're the one who just shot three high graders.'

Ryknia entered the room and threw Sevax a small black box. 'Your liquid sample, courtesy of Xenon. He says not to lose this one.'

'How is the Imperial Majestrix?' asked Sevax. 'Any news?'

'He's preparing to tap into the geode. Haxian's fully recovered. What else? Oh, Rodern's dead.'

'Really? How?'

'Hyperspatial inversion. Xenon's techies detected the Enslaver's energy signature for half a second before total disintegration. They're assuming the worst.'

Suddenly, and with a screech of whirring motors, the three dead Decepticons transformed into their vehicular modes (two tanks and a deep-sea vehicle), splitting the conference table in two and nearly flattening Ryknia.

A terrified Sevax stared into the tank's gun-barrel for several moments and then started smiling. 'It's okay,' he said. 'When I destroyed the Inhibitor Chips in their necks I must have freed up their morphcores. This must be some sort of sensory delay – a reflex action.'

Jolup tapped the tank and weighed up the vials in his other hand. 'Impressive stuff. I think I'll just pop Downstairs.'

Ryknia wandered off into the comms room, leaving Sevax to pick himself off the floor and squeeze past a heavily armoured deepwater pod. 'Who's going to clean up this mess?'

'You brought them in here,' called Ryknia, 'You can pack them away.'

'I like it already,' said Prowl before he had even left the stairs. Perceptor was standing beside an ugly portal built into the corner of one of the Institute's two basement hangars.

'I have yet to describe its function,' said Perceptor.

'We used to have one in Mechaforensics. It's a teleporter.'

'Yes and no. It's a matter transporter I converted using components scavenged from several downloading theatres. The Institute used a short-range MT to bulk-buy new hardware, so it was simply a question of modification: upgrading it to transport living beings and not merely inanimate objects.'

'Good work. Excellent work.'

'I appreciate the compliments, Prowl, but I must stress that the machine is not yet operational. I need to run tests before permitting the transport of sentient.'

'I understand.' Prowl stood back as Perceptor plunged his arms into an open panel and continued re-wiring.

'I am hoping that recalibrating the restrictive v-wave/f-wave framework in favour of trans-sonics will relinquish some much-needed data storage. If all goes well, we should have a programmable tele-portal with a range of approximately two thousand miles. Increasing the a/d points is dangerous, though: with a machine this primitive, molecular integrity cannot be guaranteed. I have considered re-routing all—'

'I did the right thing, didn't I? Reviving Soundwave, I mean.'

Perceptor continued: 'I have considered re-routing all the sub-drive modules, but that risks alienating the core co-ordinates themselves. Wiping generic field data serves no purpose, but another possible improvement lies in altering...'

'Perceptor? Should I have left him for dead?'

'...the composition of the portal's frame itself, which seems to cast its warp-net rather wide, wasting a lot of energy.'

Prowl tried to re-trace his conversational steps and waited for a break in Perceptor's techno-babble. 'Will the teleportal reach Delphi?'

'If Siren has the right equipment, yes.'

'Good.' A long pause. 'Right. Well, I'll, er, I'll speak to you later.'

Prowl left the basement hangar feeling more isolated than ever. So much for a right hand man; so much for a trusted advisor. He'd always been there for Optimus Prime. Who was there for him? He wandered through empty corridors. Everyone else was on compulsory downtime, but he was loath to shut himself down, even for an hour. He valued thinking time more than energy conservation, and besides, a part of him was afraid to sever neural connections in case he never woke up – not through carelessness or outside interference, but a subconscious desire to remain asleep.

He could hear voices nearby and crept to the top of a stairwell. Wondering why he was being so cautious, he pressed his head against the wall and peered downstairs, into the other hangar. Kup, Rev-Tone, Rapido, Quark and Rad were loitering under the strip-lights, holding glider packs.

He felt beads of lubricant appear on his forehead. He knew what was happening: they were leaving for Polyhex to retrieve Rodimus Prime's dead body. Disobeying his orders. Acting against his specific instructions. *How dare they?* No wonder Kup had been so compliant earlier; no wonder he'd backed him up during the Soundwave argument – smooth the animosity, throw him off the scent, give him something more immediate to worry about.

He heard the sound of anti-grav pads and looked around for an alarm. He had to stop them. He had to get help and alert the others and—

*Let them go.*

The thought startled him but he couldn't put it out of his mind. Let them go. Why interfere? They'd made their choice, and that choice was to deliberately ignore his strict and specific instructions. Let them rebel. Let them sneak out. Were they four of the 86 who had voted against him?

Rocket thrusters peaked and faded as the MARB left the hangar. He waited for the noise to die completely before heading for his office. Passing Soundwave's cell, he was sure of a word, a comment.

'Did you say something, Decepticon?'

'Nothing, Prowl. Nothing.'

The corridor shook, but Xenon's anti-gravity beam held him steady. Aquaria was falling apart and it didn't matter. The death of yet another world was only to be expected: his men had been siphoning energy from the planet's core and stockpiling energon cubes for over a year now. The leech had no doubt destabilised the planet's core, accelerating the collapse.

They had drawn trillions of gigowatts, enough to power the third and final warcruiser, Thermopylae, energise the Cargo and, ultimately, solve New Quintyxia's historical energon crisis.

He pulled the pulsing Matrix closer to his body and approached the vault door. The orb itself, wrapped in a casing of *sentio metallico*, was cold against his sinewy tentacle; each chiselled facet snapped against braided flesh and metal. He had no other way of holding it, no neck to hang it from, no shoulders on which to rest a chain. Instead, he held the Transformers' life force as a child clutches a favourite stuffed toy, dragging it from place to place, never letting it from sight.

He punched in a clearance code, depressurised the suction locks, and a Chinese puzzle of quad-bolt fixtures, cross-weave plating and liquid shields disentangled to the hum of a thousand binary commands. The vault door was more than a slab of cold-moulded beryllium: it was a labyrinth of time delays and false starts and forces held in check: a masterpiece of sustained tension. It opened like a flower, like an iris gorging on light. He walked inside.

The vault was almost beyond size. It was endless space, without ceilings or walls or limits; it accelerated into darkness until the eye admitted defeat. There was only one constant: the floor. It joined the invisible walls, mirrored the unseen ceiling, and gave scale to enormity.

The floor was full. It heaved with painful detail, as if the vault's contents had been compressed against its one visible surface.

Xenon walked along a gallery that stretched like a needle into wide-open space and looked over the edge. This was the masterplan, the end product, the Cargo – the final phase of a project that had begun over 60 million years ago.

The floor was full of people.

The new race; the third generation of Quintessons; ten thousand bodies inside individual birthing tubes, wrapped in wire feeds. Electrical pulses thudded into techno-organic neuro-systems, nurturing quicksilver morphocores, maintaining circuit hubs and liquid-set CPUs. Modified energon laced the oil-stream while adaptive endoskeletons flexed like anemone in saltwater.

He bowed to the new breed of biomechanical, self-generative colonists – a fresh sparkline of stronger, faster, more intelligent Quintessons. Where the Progenitors had failed, where Unicron had failed, he alone would succeed.

He'd seen the Cargo before, of course – hundreds of times. He'd seen the vault slowly fill with prototypes and birthing tubes, and been present when the first cautious trickles of energy were pumped

direct from the planet's core. But this was the first time he had visited with them with Matrix in his hand; the first time he had surveyed his creations as governor of New Quintyxia.

He fumbled with the keypad on the railing and shut down a cloaking system. The vacuum above his head was suddenly filled with a supercomputer the size of a city. It devoured nearly every cubic mile of space in the vault, expiring a short distance above the birthing tubes. It was designed to accommodate the thin viewing gallery, and so Xenon now found himself standing inside a black-walled passageway. He savoured the claustrophobia, the sudden inversion of space. All he could see was his reflection against the smooth, dark-glass surface of his ultimate creation.

He was not merely facing a computer, he thought, loosening his grip on the Matrix and offering it to the machine.

He was facing God himself.

He pushed the Matrix into the computer's velvet maw, where it was tongued and prodded. A plexi-glass shell clicked into place, buffed and blue like hard candy.

*Aboard the Ark, Brawn, Windcharger, Mirage, Trailbreaker and Cliffjumper felt something stir in their circuitry; on Cybertron, Ravage, Dirge and Soundwave suddenly stopped what they were doing and waited for the twitch in their stomachs to subside. Strung up inside Kledji, Shrapnel, Bombshell and Kickback opened and closed their mouths in an effort to scream while something melted inside their CPUs.*

And that was it. The sacrifice had been made. Somewhere far away, lost in an eternity of theoretical engineering, an inhuman sound had signalled the beginning of the end.

Nightbeat and Siren walked into the science lab expecting results, expecting a batch of irrefutable facts and figures to be chalked across the wall in a paean to reductionism. Pincher's team had all the necessary materials (an inert Galvatron and five-million shanix of top-grade equipment), so where was the instant report, the sobering anthology of diagnostics and extrapolations?

Wheeljack and Pincher huddled around a dull hemo-glass cube. Normally used for imprisoning Nebulans or mekanids, it today contained Galvatron. A 3D schematic on a tilted screen held the attention of Swerve (seated) and Sygnet (jotting notes on a databoard).

Wheeljack's hands were threaded through sockets in the cube, as if he were manipulating nuclear isotopes. Micro-tweezers protruded from his fingertips and dissected circuitry inside Galvatron's trunk. The painstaking operation was captured on camera and transferred to the big screen.

Siren shuffled to break the silence and asked if any progress had been made.

Wheeljack froze. 'We're reaching the integral part of a delicate procedure,' he huffed. 'Please be quiet.'

'What's going on?' Nightbeat whispered to Pincher.

Pincher pointed to the screen, which essentially showed a map of Galvatron's innards. 'Spot the mistake,' he said.

Nightbeat saw an alien shape among the network of white circuitry. It was tiny and circular, and therefore stood out from its ordered, cubist environment. 'The paralysis chip?'

'We found two,' said Swerve. 'The other one, inside his neural cluster, is impossible to access without killing him.'

Siren shook his head in disbelief. 'What have they done?'

'You almost sound sorry for the murderous son of a bitch,' said Pincher.

'I was thinking of all the Autobots infected with this... with this disease.'

'Got it!' Wheeljack held the Inhibitor Chip between micro-tweezers. The others gathered close. 'Amazing,' he muttered. 'Absolutely incredible.'

Galvatron's transformation took everyone by surprise. His cage splintered as he expanded and the Autobots scattered like ninepins. Reinforcements arrived and brought the Decepticon to his knees, snapping electro-bonds over his wrists and pumping a sedative into his neural cluster. Shouts petered out, extraneous bodies eventually filed back into the corridor, and soon Fastlane and Backstreet were carrying the full-sized, humanoid version of Galvatron to Delphi's only cell. It was all over in a matter of seconds.

Nightbeat helped Siren to his feet. The centre of the lab was a mess but the main worktop was somehow intact: the maelstrom had been centralised. Siren nodded thanks and left the room, looking shaken.



'You can come out now,' Nightbeat said.

Sygnnet emerged from behind a partition looking sheepish. 'You don't understand,' he said gingerly. 'I'm a Decepticon. Galvatron's my leader. At least I didn't join the fight on his side...'

Nightbeat looked away, uninterested. 'I didn't say a word.'

Wheeljack stood up slowly and unsteadily, his fist shaking. 'I still have it,' he mumbled, unfolding his fingers. The Inhibitor Chip nestled somewhere between the grip-groves of his palm. He started a second extraction and almost snapped a micro-tweezer when Siren raced back into the lab.

'Fastlane just picked up a message on a coded frequency!'

Nightbeat looked up. 'Prowl?'

'No. I don't think it's a Transformer.'

'But you just said—'

'His name's Death's Head. He's calling from the Ark.'

'What did you tell him?'

'We haven't responded yet. He's saying the Autobots are dead.'

Drilled into his office and protected by partitions, Prowl longed to be forgotten, to be surgically removed from the here and now. After all, he thought, the wound would heal, the skin would bind. The world would be a better place without him.

He'd locked the door as if blocking the only passage of air, and now, trapped inside, he waited for the oxygen to run out. According to his chronometer, his troops had come back on line 43.8 minutes ago, yet not one of them had passed his office or sought him out. Kup and the others had been gone for over two hours now. Had no one noticed their absence? He felt like the only Transformer on the planet. He wished he were.

He'd been sliced in two by the icy scalpel of conscience. Half of him longed for discovery, longed for Getaway of Red Alert or X or Y to kick down the door and scream the bad news; the other half wanted everyone to simply forget about a robot called Kup and the four recruits he'd dragged away.

An ugly thought tied knots in his stomach: what if everyone was in on it? What if there was a conspiracy designed to keep him in the dark? All those secret plans to mount a rescue team and recover Rodimus' body behind his back!

And yet... he'd survived the Crisis Act (though the episode had been buried in a pit of vibrant horrors he dared not confront), so some Autobots still believed in him. 108, to be exact, although he was forever ready to revise that number downward, closer to that crucial midway point beyond which a majority became a minority. But in the absence of a friend or a confidant, he had to rely on a stone-cold statistic for emotional support. Stats didn't let you down.

He wondered where Kup and his team were now. Wherever it was, it wasn't safe. Nowhere was safe, anymore. Cybertron was an occupied state.

He should have stopped them. He should have raised the alarm.

December 30<sup>th</sup> 2012, and five innocent Autobots had been condemned to death because he'd failed to act, because he'd allowed spite and bitterness to muddy his mind.

Perhaps there was still time. Hope offered blissful distraction. Yes, he would raise the alarm, he would alert the others. Maybe he could still salvage the situation and save himself...

He recoiled as Getaway crashed through the door.

'Kup's gone!'

The roofless MARB skittered through the air, choking on low-thrust while a six-pack of grav-pads flashed like wet saucers. Even the moonlight carried weight, gilding the Cybertronian canvas with its lunar brushwork. Everything was marked for regeneration, for knockdown and rebuild, scratch-out and re-do. Quintesson-controlled nuke-winds turned entire cities into radioactive rubble; eye-watering eco-pesticides did the rest, boiling them down into oceans of warm, bubbling putty.

In the cockpit, sectioned off by a low-slung partition, Kup hugged the curve of a yellowing windscreen. Four Autobots sat in the back, their limbs bunched and cropped. Rad hugged his knees as if

awaiting Confession; Rev-Tone and Quark sat opposite him, weapons on the floor. Rapido was crouched against the stern, bruised by the warmth of the capped thrusters.

Three miles to the ex-Polyhexian border, the Darklands, and still no one had spoken. No one dared. It was as if comforting words, however innocent, smuggled doubt and fear into the open. Conversation was contaminated; one-on-one contact was forbidden in case the contagion spread.

Rev-Tone was first to break the quarantine. Quark was his accomplice, and the infection passed painlessly between them. They spoke via their own private frequency, without sound, without lip-sync, without looking up, and so their sin went unnoticed.

*'Hands up who wants to go back?'*

*'What are we doing out here, Rev-Tone? This is stupid. This is suicide.'*

*'Didn't that occur to you before we left?'*

*'It occurred to me the moment Kup approached us. I was about to say no when you butted in, pledging your support.'*

*'Come on, Quark, you could have said no if you wanted to.'*

*'I wasn't about to let you go alone, was I?'*

The MARB dropped lower, tipping on its axis to brave the gusts of wind. In the distance, a Quintesson demolition squad detonated another smart-bomb; the crater it left was so large it seemed to suck in air, leaving a corresponding kink in orbit. Rev-Tone shielded his eyes.

*'Quark, if... if I'd known you were against this, I'd have backed down. If you don't want to go I'll stop the MARB right now.'*

Quark ignored the offer, tempting though it was. *'How many people did Kup ask on this mission?'*

*'I don't know. Ten? 20? He targeted the anti-Prowl league, the naysayers from the Crisis vote. That's the only reason he invoked the Act: to see who was suitable. It split the force in two, leaving him with a list of potential recruits. The Soundwave debacle honed the selection process further.'*

*'So why aren't we sitting amongst 86 Autobots?'*

*'Because there aren't 86 Autobots foolish enough to accept a guaranteed suicide mission. Kup found so few willing to join him that he settled for the handful of madmen he'd already found... Are we mad, Quark?'*

*'Right now, I'm inclined to say yes.'*

*'I should never have let you come. I wish you were still in the Institute, off-line like every other sane Autobot.'*

*'I'd have come along even if you'd forbidden it.'*

*'You put too much faith in me.'*

The MARB stopped and Kup swivelled in his chair. 'We're here,' he said, as if he was talking to disobedient children in the back seat.

They were hovering half a mile above freshly levelled ground. Polyhex flickered in the distance, a blend of glasseen golds and reds. Kup pointed to a patch of stippled darkness, an aberration on the horizon's whim and wane. The Quintesson fortress embossed the skyline like a stamp of velveteen blue.

Kup strapped on a crumbling backpack, twisting buckles over his shoulders. The others did the same. Soon they were all standing upright in the midsection, battered by the crump and stutter of high-altitude nuke-winds.

'We'll glide in from here, nice and low, tight formation,' said Kup. 'No pullbacks, no wide-flyers. Zero communication. Clear your heads while I take the lead. I'll be scanning for a balcony. You pull up after me by igniting the fuel reserves. One burst is all you get. The moment we climb we'll be detected, but we should be inside before they can react. Any questions?'

No movement. No words. The plague had run its course; all communication was dead. Even Rev-Tone was struck dumb by the crippling intimacy of hopelessness.

Kup dived off the MARB and sprouted rigid, black-veined wings. The others leapt after him before they could hesitate, fleeing Purgatory to glide, noiselessly, through the open gates of Hell.

Everyone was panicking; everyone except for Prowl, who hogged the eye of the storm. The other high-rankers whirled and spun, waving their arms and screaming for calm.

'Everyone's accounted for,' said Perceptor eventually. 'Everyone except Kup, Rapido, Rev-Tone, Quark and Rad.'

Prowl's eyes flashed with surprise and concern when only the latter was genuine. He flinched as Afterburner cried, 'They've gone to get Rodimus Prime's body!'

He spun on the Technobot. 'You know this for sure?'

'Prowl ordered Kup not to go,' said Red Alert with such case-closed dismissiveness that Prowl almost laughed out loud.

'He doesn't care what Prowl says,' said Afterburner with equal conviction. 'He's split, and he's taken the others with him.'

'Yes, but do you know that for a fact?' interjected Perceptor. 'You're saying that they blatantly disregarded Prowl's orders?'

Prowl stiffened. They talked about him as if he were not there. As if he were dead.

'I'm *speculating*,' spat Afterburner.

'No one goes after them,' said Prowl, desperate to re-assert his authority. 'Chromedome will monitor the airwaves in case they radio their position.' He waited for the challenge, but none came. Realising the speech had ended, the Autobots filtered back to their adopted quarters.

Perceptor slipped downstairs, back to work, and Prowl found himself alone once more. Was that it? Was it over? He wondered whether guilt ever truly died, and, if so, when he'd be able to put this episode behind him. Not yet. Now while Kup was still out there, beyond his reach. How long before he was found out, before Perceptor or Red Alert or some paranoid quick-thinker put two and two together?

If he had to choose between exposure and secrecy, he'd take secrecy - secrecy and everlasting guilt. No one need ever know the truth, he thought to himself.

'You're right, Prowl: no one need ever know.'

Soundwave's voice came from inside his cell. Prowl leaned against the door and whispered, 'What did you just say?'

'I just agreed with you.'

'What the hell are you talking about?'

'Nothing. Just your minor indiscretion, your uncharacteristic lapse in judgement. The fact that you could have stopped them, and thereby saved their lives.'

The colour drained from Prowl's world. 'You saw me.'

'I heard you. I heard your thoughts. Reading minds is far more rewarding in an enemy environment, don't you think? I stripped my side of secrets long ago.'

Prowl put his back to the door and rubbed his face. For a moment he was lost in an infinite mental loop: he imagined Soundwave scanning his mind to find thoughts about Soundwave scanning his mind to find thoughts about Soundwave scanning his mind...

'What's the point of this conversation?' he said, eventually. 'I suppose you want to blackmail me?'

'And I thought I was the only mind-reader.'

'Just tell me what you want.'

'Freedom. Release me. Let me work with you. Autobots and Decepticon side by side, just as before.'

'You already have the upper hand, Soundwave. There's no need to sweeten the bargain by feigning hopes of an alliance.'

'True, and therefore all the more reason to take me at my word. Open this door and I'll say nothing more about your regrettable error.'

'Even if you told them everything, they wouldn't believe you. They know you're a liar. You're a Decepticon, for god's sake. You could give them digital footage of my "regrettable error" and they'd laugh in your face.'

'Perhaps you're right. Yes, in that case I will tell them. I'll tell Getaway, Throwback, Chromedome, Afterburner and anyone who'll stop outside this door and listen. And then I'll scan their minds to see if they believe me.' The door creaked as Soundwave leant in closer. 'Because yours isn't the only the mind I can penetrate, Prowl. The Crisis vote is still fresh in everyone's thoughts. Many troops are willing to believe anything.' He withdrew into the shadows. 'But, of course, I could be lying.'

'How about I open up that door and shoot you dead?'

'How about I transmit your location to every Quintesson on the planet?'

'You can't. You're damaged.'

'Am I? Funny what you can do with a gun to your head.'

'Rot in the Pit.'

‘Think about it, Prowl. I’m not going anywhere. But unless that changes, the next Autobot to loiter outside this door might just get to hear your life story.’

Siren waited for the audience to gather around the comms screen and nodded for Fastlane to re-establish contact. The transmission was slapped on screen, jittery and sharp, rippled like newsreel.

‘That’s Death’s Head alright,’ said Wheeljack. ‘He’s a bounty hunter, and about as deceitful as they come. What’s he doing on the Ark?’

Siren opened comms. ‘This is commander Siren of Autobase 2. We’ve received your distress call.’

‘My name’s Death’s Head. I’m the sole survivor of the Autobot City team. The Quintessons attacked us in hyperspace. When we tried to phase back into reg-space the transwarp generator backfired and killed the crew.’

‘Everyone except you.’

‘I’m not a Transformer, eh? I have a different... resilience. What’s the situation on Cybertron?’

‘Hold on, Death’s Head, you’re breaking up.’ Siren froze transmission and turned to the others. ‘You’re right, we can’t trust him. For all we know the Quintessons ransacked the Ark and hired him as bait.’

Nightbeat displaced Fastlane at the controls with a gentle ‘May I?’ and re-opened channels. ‘I think I know what’s going on,’ he said to Siren. ‘Tell Magnus we’ve passed the test, Death’s Head. He can come out now.’

Ultra Magnus stepped into view. ‘Sorry about all that, Delphi. How did you guess?’

‘Death’s Head’s story didn’t add up,’ said Nightbeat. ‘Quite apart from the dubious “lone survivor” scenario, we were expected to believe that a bounty hunter would bother making contact with his dead employer’s teammates? I don’t think so. Plus he used a coded frequency to make contact. So I’m guessing that after you guys survived re-entry into reg-space you paid a non-Transformer to make first contact and assess the situation on Cybertron.’

‘I had no choice. It was the safest way of ascertaining what had happened in our absence.’

‘How much of Death’s Head’s story was true?’ asked Siren, annoyed at being duped.

‘Autobot City has been destroyed, but so has the Quintesson mothership. We’ve sustained considerable losses. Our stasis blocks are full to capacity.’ He saw a familiar face in the Delphi crowd. ‘Wheeljack? I thought you were dead!’

‘Not quite. I was with Mainframe and Centurion inside Metroplex.’

‘It’s not good down here,’ continued Siren. ‘The Quintessons have taken over the planet. Everyone else is dead or imprisoned. We need you here as soon as possible.’

‘Our ETA is two days, maximum. We’ll make contact when we reach orbit, not before.’

‘Understood. It’s good to know there’s someone else out there.’

‘The feeling’s mutual. Magnus out.’

Several hundred miles away Q-217 pulled off his mouthpiece, upturned his chair and bounded to Quantax’s throne. ‘Commander, I’m detecting movement on the west wing: gliders! They tried to duck under the radar!’

‘At last!’ Quantax prodded his Hot Rod footstool. ‘How many?’

‘Five, commander. They’ve landed on the uppermost elevation.’

‘Five?’ Quantax started to laugh but checked himself, as if the joke was suddenly on him. ‘They send *five* against an entire army? What kind of insult is this?’ He leapt up and grabbed a weapon.

‘Level 19,’ said Q-217, re-empting the question. ‘Heading this way.’

Quantax scooped Hot Rod by the scruff of his crumbling neck and dragged him towards the door. ‘Let’s give ’em what they came for.’

‘Good news, Prowl. Providing Delphi has an arrival point, the matter transporter can be used as a teleporter.’ Perceptor waited for a reaction. ‘With your permission I’ll begin diverting power.’

Prowl continued studying the dust patterns on his desk. 'How can we find out if Delphi has a link-up?' he mumbled.

'We're waiting to ask them. Chromedome's found a way to send a scrambled messages.' He pretended to scrape oil from his fingertip. 'Forgive me, Prowl, but I thought you'd be pleased.'

'I'm just worried about Kup and the others. Aren't you?'

'Of course. But there's nothing we can do.'

'Yes... it's too late to do anything. Thank you, Perceptor. Dismissed.'

Throwback was waiting nervously outside as Perceptor left the room. Prowl gestured at the visitor's chair.

'Sit down, Throwback. What's the matter?'

'I knew about them, Prowl. Going away, I mean. I was involved.'

Prowl stiffened. 'In what way?'

'Kup tried to recruit me after the, er, vote. He didn't say where he was heading. He didn't need to.'

'Did you tell anyone?'

'No. I was going to tell you. I should have. I wanted to. But... but when I turned Kup down, he swore me to secrecy. I didn't think he'd find anyone stupid enough to join him, and then the next thing I knew the alarms went off.'

Prowl said nothing. He knew Throwback would misinterpret his silence as anger but he didn't care. Even now, facing a guilty soldier – a soldier blaming himself for someone else's mistake – he felt an overwhelming detachment.

'I felt sorry for him,' Throwback added as a weak epilogue.

'It doesn't matter. You're not at fault.'

'I am, commander. I should have reported Kup the moment he approached me.'

'I wouldn't have been able to prevent what happened.'

'Why not? You're in command: he would've listened to you!'

Prowl's chair creaked as he leant forward. 'Kup? No. He called an emergency meeting because he was unhappy with my command. He would not have listened to me.'

'Okay, maybe not Kup – but the others? Definitely. And the whole enterprise would have been undermined. So by my reckoning, if I'd said something to you at the time, they'd still be here.'

'I disagree.' [*You're right.*] 'Nothing you or I could have done would have stopped them leaving.' [*Yes it would.*] 'You shouldn't blame yourself, Throwback.' [*Blame me instead: it's my fault, it's my purpose: I absorb guilt, I digest pain. I have monopolised suffering. Give me your anguish and watch.*]

'Thank you for your confession,' said Prowl, but somehow the words reshaped themselves as they left his lips, and came out as: 'Thank you for your report. Dismissed.'

Throwback stayed his ground, entranced by something on the desk.

Prowl looked down and saw that his hands were shaking.

*Part 1: The inner hull of the Ark begins to ripple and swell, bulging against the barrage of firepower. My ragged assembly of Autobots - my army of the scuffed and scorched - can only stare, mute, as comm-ports fizzle and cables snap. I tighten my grip on the concussion rifle and stride towards the wall. 'Our hull is breached!' I yell... and the picture bleeds itself white.*

[It's trying to get in, the outside world. Trust me.]

*Part 2: Face-up and eye-fried I stare at the ceiling. It twists in muddy loops and plaits. It stings my optics with detail. Someone is shouting. I sit up and immediately count my wounds (force of habit); I'm in a temple and in front of me, his back turned, there is a Guardian robot with fists like lava husks. My hand snaps into focus as I reach for a weapon.*

[Well? I'm ready. I can't keep you out much longer. I'm used to you. I know your prod poke push pinch by now. Come on.]

*Part 3: The Quintesson ship stinks of darkness and the architecture of pain. Lime light coats control boards and keypads. Robots I barely recognise jam-pack the sticky neon fizzle. I am pistol-whipped to my knees and jostled with fists and laser burns. The blows increase in force and ferocity, and I decide to jump ship. I've had enough.*

[And so have you, it seems. Real-life pain floods my system and once more I lunge towards freedom without flexing a muscle.]

‘Hello?’

Hosehead, standing on guard, jumped at the sound and nearly dropped his weapon as the patient opened his eyes. ‘Optimus! Thank Primus! I – I – My god! Optimus Prime!’

‘It seems that you have the upper hand, my friend. I’m afraid I don’t know your name.’

‘It’s Hosehead! Don’t worry, I’m not offended. Nightbeat explained everything. I admit it took some swallowing, and I wasn’t sure whether I believed it at first – I mean, the whole wormhole business – but now it makes perfect sense. Wow. Optimus Prime.’

Optimus sat up and swung his legs off the operating table, then winced at the pain. ‘I’m glad it makes sense to someone.’

‘Careful sir, you’re not quite tip-top yet. I’ll call Cloudraker for a check-up.’ He brought his wrist communicator to his lips and paused, as if reluctant to share Prime with anyone else. ‘You know, I should apologise for what happened earlier. You know, when we came charging out the base. There have been impostors, you see, and we haven’t seen you for, like, years.’

‘So Nightbeat was saying.’ Optimus began disconnecting cables and putting them neatly to one side. ‘How is he?’

‘Who, Nightbeat? Worried sick, not that he’d show it. I knew you’d pull through, but it was touch and go for a while. Imagine dying on us a second time! Can you—’

Optimus raised his hand. ‘What did you just say?’

Galvatron looked as if he had been poured into the holding chair and left to set. Smothered in pincer clamps and good old-fashioned Inhibitor Claws, a loose muzzle hanging pendulously from his jaw, he looked at the viewing gallery set into a top corner. Two figures, Nightbeat and Siren, were woven into the grain of the tintured glass, their frowning faces stretching in and out of sight.

‘Darkmount has better cells than this,’ Galvatron slurred.

‘Had,’ corrected Siren, noting the slight delay between speaking and hearing the echo of his voice down below. ‘Right now Darkmount has better craters than us, and that’s about it. Bombsite chic: it’s all the rage these days.’

‘Come down here and chat, Autobot.’

‘Do you even know where you are, Galvatron?’ said Nightbeat. ‘Do you know what’s happened to you since you were abducted from your fortress?’ His voice was measured and direct, but he felt uneasy talking to the Decepticon leader. The closest he’d come to ‘Con Command was a couple of run-ins with Thunderwing in 1989 and a ringside seat when Scorponok and Shockwave had duked it out in New Jersey a year later. Faced with the tactile flesh-and-bone fury of the lord and founder himself, the other three seemed insignificant. ‘You teleported into a Quintesson concentration camp. You were rescued by a team of Micromasters. Autobot Micromasters.’

‘In case you didn’t know,’ Siren continued, ‘The Quintessons have taken over the planet. Your Decepticons are dead or dying. Where have you been?’

Galvatron considered his options and eventually said, ‘Aquaria – the planet which serves as the Quintessons’ base of operations. They had better cells too.’

‘Did you see any Autobots on Aquaria?’

‘Yes,’ Galvatron grinned. ‘Thunderclash and a Pretender. They’re dead. They were cut open and spread over the floor. The Quintessons walk on their entrails and laugh when they slip. I passed the time by counting footprints on their faces and—’

‘—all your troops are dead and dying,’ rejoined Siren, ‘and every scrap of Cybertronian land you ever stole has been retaken, and your legacy is spat upon and ridiculed by Quintesson officials who have achieved in *five days* what you spent four million years failing to do.’

Galvatron stared at the gallery glass, trying to pinpoint Siren’s face. He laughed and the holding chair rattled, coughing rust into the spotlight.

Nightbeat detuned his optics so that the Decepticon was replaced by his own reflection. ‘We found something inside you,’ he said, playing Good Cop to Siren’s Bad. ‘Something nasty. A microchip that seems to prevent transformation.’

‘It’s called an Inhibitor Chip. I was Xenon’s test subject.’ He paused. ‘Xenon is their leader. Let me out and I’ll tell you more.’

‘What else is there to tell? We have a chip, a planet, their leader’s name. You’ve got nothing else to give us.’

Galvatron would not be baited. ‘I’ve been your captive guest for 20 minutes and I already know that you’re both terrified. I know that your Autobots are just as crushed as my Decepticons, maybe more so. You have no strategy, no guiding hand. Where’s Rodimus? Magnus? Prowl? Why are two mid-rankers interrogating me – *me!* – behind reinforced glass?’

Nightbeat held his tongue and wished he had a reply. How had he moved from small-time investigator in a backwater Autobase to Chief Inquisitor and joint commander of the Cybertronian Autobots? His lined and lived-in face stared back at him, offering no answers. The gallery door swished open behind him and a new face appeared alongside his reflection. ‘Optimus!’ he exclaimed. ‘You’re alive!’

‘Yes and no... Can I have a word?’

Something was wrong, thought Nightbeat. Something was very wrong. He felt a powerful desire to stay where he was, but stepped away from the window nonetheless.

‘Optimus?’ cried Galvatron.

Prime looked through the viewing glass.

‘Megatron?’

‘A future version of Megatron,’ explained Nightbeat, closing the medi-bay door a few seconds later and turning to Optimus, who was sitting on the edge of the operating table. ‘This is the first time that we’ve ever captured him. Anyway, what did you want to talk to me about?’

‘Ethan Zachary.’

Suddenly the laser-scalpel in Nightbeat’s hand became the most interesting thing in the room. ‘Who told you?’ he said.

‘Someone called Hose Head. By accident, I think. He didn’t know what he was saying... He didn’t know it was a closely guarded secret known to everyone except me.’

‘Did you get the full story?’

‘Let’s see... Three years after my re-activation on Earth I’m killed by one of the planet’s inhabitants in a trap engineered by Megatron. The abridged version? I die in 1987.’

‘Yes, that, er, pretty much covers it.’ Nightbeat put down the scalpel. ‘I don’t know what else to say.’

‘You lied to me, Nightbeat. The Optimus Prime of 2012 isn’t “missing in deep space”. He’s lying in a tomb ten miles from an Autobot city on Earth. And that Optimus isn’t even *me!* I’m in a funeral barge on some damn moon!’

‘I thought I was doing the right thing by not telling you. Look, it’s a big enough shock to wake up four million years into the future. I didn’t want to burden you with the news of your death.’

‘Burden me? Did you honestly think, did you honestly *believe*, that I could interact with a planet’s worth of Autobots – many of whom I count as my closest friends – without someone giving the game away?’

‘To be honest, no. I guessed this would happen. It was inevitable, I suppose.’

‘Then why—?’

‘Because I didn’t want to see you get hurt! If you were going to find out the truth, I wanted to keep you in the dark as long as possible. So I’m not going to wake you up in 2012 and give you the full low-down. I’m going to delay your pain for as long as possible. Cowardly – yes. Stupid – yes. Do I regret it? Oh yes. But what else can I do?’

‘What can *you* do? Nightbeat, I’m the one who’s just been told – by some poor trooper who almost seems to think it’s *funny* – that my life will end at a certain time, at a certain place, in a certain way. I now know that three years after stepping outside the Ark for the first time a low-detonation fracture bomb will be triggered inside my stomach and I will die.’

At least he’s angry, thought Nightbeat. ‘I should never have brought you here. I know it’s no consolation, but I would do anything to change things.’

Optimus looked up with fierce interest. ‘Who’s with me when I die? Prowl? Ratchet? You?’

Nightbeat almost found himself lying again. He fought the urge to make the truth more palatable and shook his head. ‘The Protectobots. You... you wouldn’t know them.’

‘Is it a quick death? What happens to the Matrix? Do you remember to remove it from my chest or—’ He stopped himself, muffling the words with his hand. ‘No. Ignore me. I don’t want to know.’

Nightbeat sat next to him on the edge of the operating table. It was weird: up close, Prime somehow seemed smaller. Perhaps he was just getting used to him.

‘I apologise for shouting earlier,’ Optimus said eventually. ‘I was just shocked, not angry. I wasn’t angry.’

‘How do you feel?’

‘I don’t know. None of this seems real. To me, 2012 might as well be 2020 or 3020 – it’s just a number. I’m surrounded by Autobots I’ve never seen and Cybertron is crumbling and the *moons* have gone! And Megatron! Can you believe, Nightbeat, that I was actually disappointed when I saw that the prisoner downstairs wasn’t “my” Megatron? It’s not my life anymore! I feel so detached that the news of my death should be meaningless... and yet at the same time I can barely bring myself to stand. I suppose... I suppose I always thought I’d see the end of the war. It’s unrealistic, of course – why should I be guaranteed survival? – but it kept me going.’

‘It keeps us all going.’ Nightbeat unlocked his waist compartment and took out the mind-purge device. ‘I told you about this when we were trapped underground. I planned to use it when I took you back to 1984 but I can activate it now, if you like. I can erase our conversation, the memory of your arrival here, everything.’ He held out the device. ‘Please. It’s all I can give.’

Optimus stared at it for a long time. ‘No,’ he said eventually. ‘Thank you, but no. What would happen when I awoke on this operating table second time round? You’d have to give me another potted, censored case history. The Optimus Prime of 2012 would once more be lost in space. And then, at some point, another Hose Head would come along and ruin the illusion, and we’d go through this all over again.’

‘Do you want to go back now? To the wormhole, I mean. It can be arranged.’

‘I’m not ready to leave, not with things as they are. Whatever the implications, you brought me here to help. Besides, I suppose...’

Nightbeat waited. ‘You suppose what?’

‘I suppose my being here constitutes a reprieve of sorts, doesn’t it? For a while at least you’ve removed me from the loop, from a time-line that has me die in 1987. Perhaps, in some twisted way, I should—’

‘No. Don’t thank me for this. I never want you to be grateful for what I’ve done.’

Red Alert and Throwback watched as Chromedome pulled up a chair in front of the monitor screen and started drumming an arena of yellowing keyboards at 600bpm.

‘And there were no signs of a forced exit?’ Red Alert asked Throwback.

‘None whatsoever. The door was still locked.’

‘Any damage to the floor?’

‘No, sir.’

Prowl walked in. ‘Any clues, Red Alert?’

‘Nothing. To all intents and purposes, Soundwave just vanished.’

‘How can a Decepticon disappear into thin air?’

‘Maybe he activated some sort of personal warp gate,’ offered Throwback.

‘Possible,’ conceded Red Alert, ‘although I thought every warp gate was scrapped years ago, after that subspace rupture in 2003. Besides, I checked him out before reactivation; he was clean.’

‘When did you discover him missing, Throwback?’ asked Prowl.

‘Just over an hour ago. There was no reply from the cell when I walked past, so I checked inside. He was gone.’

‘What if someone let him out?’ asked Red Alert, and saw Prowl shake his head. ‘You don’t agree?’

‘We can’t start suspecting our own.’

‘I was only suggesting that—’

‘You’re letting your paranoia get the better of you.’

Red Alert quickly looked down at his notes, embarrassed.

‘Look,’ Prowl continued, ‘if you like we can check the lock to see when it was last opened.’



'It wouldn't work. The lock only records the most recent de-activation, in this case Throwback's override at 240. It was the first thing I checked.'

'I should have guessed. My apologies, Red Alert.' Prowl looked down at Chromedome. 'What about you? Any progress?'

'I've made a connection with Delphi, commander, and I'm ready to transmit.'

Prowl stayed in the shadows, his circuitry still rippling with nerves. 'Perceptor,' he said into an intercom, 'we're about to speak to Delphi. You'd better get up here now.'

The picture, when it appeared, throbbed with wayward contrast. Fastlane was de-synced by interference; he shifted outside his body contours and blinked at an equally bad picture of Chromedome & Co.

'They're alright,' beamed Red Alert. 'Thank god we're not the only ones.'

'What's wrong with the picture?' asked Perceptor, walking in with oil up his arms.

'It's a scrambled transmission,' explained Chromedome. 'Buffered, tri-coded and fed through an encryption press. We're not talking liquid digital here: you want high-resolution, get me something that doesn't pre-date the Golden Age, okay?'

*'This is Outpost Delphi. First Officer Fastlane responding to your message.'*

Everyone looked at Prowl, who was staring at his feet.

'Do you, er, want to respond, commander?' asked Chromedome.

'You reply.'

Chromedome was not prepared. 'Er, Fastlane? This is Chromedome. We're calling from the Institute of Higher Programming.'

'Can he hear us?' asked Red Alert, leaning into the intercom. 'Nod if you can hear me, Fastlane.'

'Was that a nod?' asked Chromedome.

Throwback shrugged. 'I dunno. Maybe.'

'Ask him about a warp-drive receptor,' said Perceptor. Chromedome did as he was told, and Fastlane started tapping his keyboard furiously.

Red Alert pointed to two new on-screen figures, grey and distorted. 'Who are these two? Is that Nightbeat?'

'This is ridiculous!' Prowl snapped. 'Sixty million years of telecommunications and we can't even send a message across the planet!'

'My job would be easier,' said Chromedome tersely, 'if the Quintessons hadn't destroyed all but their own orbital satellites.' As if on cue, the picture collapsed altogether. 'That wasn't me: we were hi-jacked by another signal – an Autobot SOS. Someone's nearby.'

'Patch into the perimeter cameras,' said Red Alert. 'Now.'

Outside, Kup was feeling his way from a flaming MARB. Hot Rod's was corpse slung over his shoulders like a roll of grey carpet.

'Well at least they're safe,' concluded Siren, as Fastlane gave up trying to re-establish contact. 'And if Prowl and the others have survived, so could many more.'

'Does Prowl command that contingent?' asked Optimus, his voice shaded with quiet pride.

'He does now, sir, yes,' replied Siren, 'Ever since Rodimus Pr—'

'Since their leader was incapacitated,' interrupted Nightbeat. There was still so much Prime didn't know; one revelation did not necessarily demand full and frank disclosure.

'I'm sure he does a fine job. He's a fine officer.'

Nightbeat wondered if Prime was chalking up each Autobot destined to outlive him. Others would be bitter; Prime seemed to be reassured by the exercise.

'Sorry to interrupt the party,' chimed Wheeljack, entering the room with a data-board in one hand and a grey orb in the other.

Sygnnet followed a few paces behind his ex-mentor, his hands pinned behind his waist. He gave Prime a sideways glance that was not reciprocated. 'We're ready to make our report on the paralysis chip. If you'd like to join us in the briefing chamber...'

A moment later, the Delphi crew was assembled in the main hall. Wheeljack hugged the podium and waited for the last Autobots to take their seats. Swerve, Pincher and Sygnet sat to the corner of the stage, crossed their legs and nonchalantly studied databoards while waiting for the speaker to begin.

'First off,' began Wheeljack, 'a disclaimer. What you are about to hear is a preliminary report based on first-hand observations and recent discoveries. I felt it necessary to address you now, at this early stage, because our findings have serious implications for everyone.' He clicked a remote and a schematic of the Inhibitor Chip appeared on screen. Magnified thousands of times over, it still looked obscenely complex, as if hundreds of circuit boards had been saturated with x-rays. 'You're looking at a manufactured microchip, cold-heat construction, streamed nano-soldering. Very cheap, very nasty.'

'This "Inhibitor Chip" extracted from Galvatron's rib cage is a paralysis tool based on our own Claw. Its overriding function is to prevent transformation. We detected two chips inside Galvatron; the other one is lodged firmly in his neural cluster, and that's the one we're concerned about.'

'We believe that this sample was implanted while Galvatron was in an alternate mode. Because it wasn't embedded in the neural cluster it was relatively easy to extract. Removing the original chip would probably have killed him.'

'We think that the chip buries itself in the inner-cortical segment of the brain module and breaks down transformation protocols by muting dialogue between neural processors and the morphcore... Yes, Siren?'

'How did Galvatron manage to transform?'

'He has unique antiviral systems – an added extra from Unicron.'

Siren folded his arms. 'So to summarise, Wheeljack, the prisoners have been given an internal Inhibitor Claw.'

'It's not quite that simple. It seems the chip may have some unsavoury side effects: passivity, loss of self-awareness, reduced reaction time, depression, psychosis – the list is potentially endless. What's more, the symptoms may be unique to each host.'

Someone in the audience muttered 'Nucleon'.

'You said that Galvatron's inner defence systems disarmed the Inhibitor chip.'

'Yes, Nightbeat. We're hoping to introduce similar systems into non-chipped Transformers. A vaccination program, if you will.'

'But the prisoners, the ones who have already been injected – would the anti-virals work retroactively?'

'No. It would be impossible to break communication between brain and morphcore without killing them.'

'So does this mean that the captives will never be able to transform again?'

'Yes. I'm afraid it does.'

A crowd of Autobots ran into the open, ignoring Prowl's weak warning. To hell with security, they thought, this was their friend.

Kup lay facedown in the sun, the warmth finding its way into paper-cuts and heat-sores. As Jackpot and Getaway lifted him up, the ground seemed to retain a chalk line of shed casing and red lubricant (and lubricant should never be red). Hot Rod rolled into a ditch and quietly fell apart. Throwback scooped him up while the Technobots dissected the MARB.

Prowl teetered on the brink of the Institute, scratching his palms. He wondered where the rest of them were. Where was Rad? Where were Rev-Tone and Quark and Rapido?

Inside the Institute, Slapdash placed Kup's body on a circuit slab. Chromedome moved in with bodyscanners and energon packs. Autobots fanned out like a Greek chorus, hungry for surgical action: y-incisions and cutaways and vacuum-snaps. Red Alert shouted medical jargon he only half-understood while Chromedome lashed the patient with arterial wiring (engen feeds, life-support – the usual waxy pipelines).

Kup jolted upright, screamed, and was pushed back down. He was branded with scalpel burns and pinched by a dozen healing hands.

'Where are the others?' said Prowl, shuffling quietly into the room. Time-lagged, somehow condemned to play catch-up, he slipped into the crowd to repeat the question no one else would ask. Some Autobots granted passage, others blocked him, forcing a diversion. He wandered towards the surgical

epicentre, towards the enemy, trapped in a shifting maze of people he no longer liked or trusted. ‘You’re a 108,’ he said to a sidestepper; ‘You’re an 86,’ he told an Autobot who would not get out of the way. No one seemed to be listening to him.

Kup saw Throwback dump Hot Rod’s body onto a bench and his face warped like corrugated iron. ‘I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,’ he said, and Chromedome stepped back to let the veteran talk.

‘What happened?’ asked Perceptor sternly.

Prowl chewed his fingers in the second row.

‘We made it inside, and they – they were waiting. They killed Rapido and Rad instantly. We fought our way into a control room.’

‘What about Rev-Tone and Quark?’

‘They weren’t supposed to—’

‘What happened to them, Kup?’

‘They got them too.’

Prowl backed into the crowd. His bedside space was immediately filled by new Autobots, like seawater filling a sandpit.

Perceptor continued the interrogation. ‘Were you followed?’

‘No. I don’t think so. I took a different route back and, and—’

‘And what?’

‘And I think they let me run anyway.’

‘You stole a MARB and four troops, Kup. Do you appreciate the gravity of your situation?’

‘I don’t know what to say – please – it’s my fault.’

‘Leave it, Perceptor,’ said Red Alert softly, placing a hot hand on his elbow.

‘Leave it? No, not this time. Four Autobots are dead because...’ He looked over his shoulder and scanned the front row. ‘Where’s Prowl?’

‘He left,’ said Throwback. ‘He said he had something to do.’

4/11.002983712

*Does not compute.*

4/11.002983712

*Does not compute.*

4/11.002983712

*Does not compute.*

Prowl wandered through the Institute in a daze. Doped and docile, shuffling down endless corridors, he itched but did not scratch.

A lifetime of memories took up space his mind. Over-ingesting energon for the first time (never again); leaving Ibex for the big city, determined to visit the Great Dome; watching The Ceremony in 3<sup>rd</sup> Cycle 270 and – to his eternal shame – being cautioned after causing a disturbance; quitting his job as a chartered surveyor to join the Mechaforensics Division; taking the lead in the legendary Morphcore Murders case (a serial killer was maiming Autobots; he’d suspected that Megatron was testing his new transformation device, but had never been able to prove it); patrolling the last ever States Games, where Megatron had turned into a gun (the first time he – or anyone else in the crowd – had witnessed that type of transformation); bumping into the defeated Iaconian athlete, Orion Pax, at some anti-Decepticon rally and thinking he was a sore loser; arresting a Vosian terrorist he would come to know as Grimlock; huddling next to a battered radio, listening to reports of a civil war and telling Wheeljack that it would be over before the next cycle; Autobrand, of course; signing up for Strikeforce Alpha; seeing the Ark for the first time; seeing a *human* for the first time; stumbling through a Flashback Portal; holding his best friend’s hand as he died before his eyes; fighting Unicron; discovering the Nanobot conspiracy; being told by Ratchet, some windswept night not so long ago, that he was self-critical, that he punished himself for every single mistake...

But ignoring all that, accepting all that, in spite of all that:

4/11.002983712

*Does not compute.*

He felt like an auteur. His life was a widescreen biopic where his every success was edited into a fleeting pre-credit resume. The film was set in 2012 and featured a string of failures catalogued by a director privy to his every nuance. Even as he watched excerpts, bridging sequences and cutaways, he was sketching out the final scene, storyboarding every shot. There was only one way the film would end.

He started seeing ghosts:

Up ahead, Soundwave closed his cell door and nodded goodbye. He kept on walking, rheumy and light-headed. The film spun in his head.

He approached his office and noticed that the door was wide open. Continuity error: he always locked the door. The inconsistency troubled him. He moved on and saw Hot Rod propping up his desk like a papier-mâché sculpture. He kept on walking.

There was Thunderclash, soaking up the shadows, stripped to a wiry loop of slim-limbs and ball bearings. He waved and kept on walking.

Sideswipe passed him on the stairs, his back a blizzard of split-end circuitry and fist-deep craters.

Prowl trip-toed downstairs.

The film jerked towards the finale. Prowl relinquished the world, casting off everything except the stretch of subterranean corridor. Nothing existed beyond the camera's unblinking eye, beyond the letterbox frame. To his left, he noticed a stack of Autobot corpses piled high. He recognised faces last seen in AMC1, looked away, and kept on walking.

Rev-Tone and Quark appeared from an adjacent corridor, heads turned to each other, their conversation embellished with hand movements and fleeting smiles. It was only when they walked past an electric light that he noticed the golden bullet holes riddling their bodies.

He passed the main hangar, with its cold walls, its sub-zero temperatures. Up ahead was a boarded entrance. The lettering had peeled into scraps so that the words 'In Progress' were no longer legible. He scraped aside the slab of metal he had positioned earlier. The windowless room hummed with recycled power. Natural daylight had never found its way to these monitors or worktops. Stasis pods lined the walls, glowing pink and lime. These were the works-in-progress, the incompletes.

He walked to the largest tank and stared at the body inside, where for thousands of years it had been percolating in a warm chemical bath. "Number Nine" was little more than a motor engine bobbing in carbonated engex. The body-husk was pimpled with rust. Underneath the patient's name, painted in modest lower-case, it said: *corrodia gravis*.

Prowl pressed his fingers against the glass. His pale reflection, pulled across the curvature, stared back with wide-eyed glee. It was smiling. A proud smile. A sad smile.

He pressed harder, testing the resistance. The first cracks appeared under his fingertips.

‘For he who lives more lives than one,  
More deaths than one must die.’

**Oscar Wilde**  
*‘The Critic as Artist’*

‘I ask why the excavation is taking so long. My Circuitmaster says it is because he doesn’t want to disturb the Eye of Cybertron by drilling into the floor. People are impatient. They say the Fifth Epoch is upon us. They say this is the Second Coming we have so long prayed for. This yellow robot, with the three fingers, with the circles in his palms, with the twitch in his elbow – they say he is the Primal vessel.’

**Transcript of memfiles uploaded from Herotese,  
born-again First Churcher, December 2012**

‘Closed for cleansing’

**Sign outside Maccadam’s Old Oil House,  
circa 2 million years BFE**

*ifetrac*

December 31, 2012.

The monopod bounced across the surface of Helex like a tarnished bauble, its feeble engines choking on boiler fluid. It span on a geodesic line, rolled to halt, throbbed with kickback and ejected a cramped passenger.

Soundwave rolled the pod into a nearby crater. He was impressed: low on fuel and stripped of suspension, the one-man bubble-craft he'd found inside a bomb shelter with other emergency supplies (auto-corrosion pills, a rusted warp gate, a cracked communicube) had somehow snowballed him across 300 miles of occupied territory. The Autobots assumed that their enemies lounged in barracks waiting on Galvatron's whim and whinny: not so. In fact, the Decepticons worked quietly and assiduously, rigging an entire planet in preparation for the End Days, for the Big Push. Monopods were stashed undercover, gunports were hidden inside fake craters, and listed buildings were used to hide Harvester Units.

In the distance he saw what looked like a deserted missile silo: Leagus. Shimmering in Helexian mist, Sixshot's headquarters seemed to hesitate on the ruby-dew horizon, afraid to settle. Soundwave headed for Leagus, keeping to the built-up, burnt-down areas. As he walked, he pictured Sixshot throwing shapes in the command room, prancing and prattling in front of his new army – a reservoir of manpower and reinforcements bottled inside a bunker, forever held in check.

He froze at a distant sound. He sensed Quintessons everywhere, overrunning the planet like trickling water. This was the revised future, the new order, the day-by-day of New Quintyxia. The sound did not repeat itself, and he calmed down using a process of sonic elimination: his footfalls, the fridge-hum of his CPU, the oboe moan of bending wind.

He had initiated a bio-scan the moment he'd escaped from the Institute. As a first generation carrier unit, a symbiotic push/pull existed between himself and his cassettes: a simple mind-scan, thrown wide, could isolate each one of them. For some reason, Overkill, Spooler and Slugfest were in the Manganese Mountains, their readout sigs warped and detuned. Beastbox and Squawktalk had died – quite horribly – at the Polyhex Massacre. That only left his original team – Ravage, Frenzy, Rumble, Buzzaw and Laserbeak – whose life-signals resonated loud and clear from the silo up ahead. Now, two signals were heading his way.

He looked up to trace their approach. The sky was sequinned with stars and more besides: new satellites, freshly loosed from their traps and tarpaulins; surveillance globes spinning on their axes; sky-scraping spotlights raking beams across pits and pylons. Somewhere among all this, Laserbeak's eyes shone a peculiar red. He released an object from his talons: a cassette that expanded and hit the ground as Frenzy.

Soundwave smiled as the bird landed on his forearm. 'As punctual as ever, Laserbeak.'

'We thought you were dead, boss,' said Frenzy. 'What's happening out there?'

'You mean you don't know?'

'Well, we get bulletins from Sixshot. The Quints are attacking the planet; the Autobots are holding 'em off.'

'A sadly outdated report. The Quintessons have conquered Cybertron. Perhaps if you hadn't locked yourselves indoors it might be a different story.'

'Hey, we're just obeying orders. You expect me to cross Sixshot? He wants us to wait inside until—'

‘Until what? Until the entire planet is terraformed into a replica of Quintesson? Until they create settlements and democracies and trade routes? Until you walk, blinking, into the sunlight and find yourself in the middle of a towering Quintesson metropolis?’

‘Sixshot said the Autos were holding them back.’

‘Does he know I’m coming?’

‘He doesn’t even know you’re alive, boss.’

They entered the silo. Decepticons sat in rec-rooms and barracks, mole-blind and anaemic, aching in silence. Numbed with boredom, penned under low grey ceilings and magnesium lanterns, they were already defeated. Soundwave felt sick.

‘He’s down there,’ said Frenzy, standing at the end of a dirty corridor. ‘In his war room.’

Soundwave shooed his conspirators away and walked into Sixshot’s chamber without knocking.

The Overlord of New Helex was perching on the edge of a spotless throne, engrossed by soundless monitor screen. He turned at the sound of the door. ‘Soundwave! Who let you inside?’

‘What does it matter? We’re all Decepticons.’

‘Of course. I am a little shocked, that’s all. Welcome to my—’

‘Shut up, Sixshot. Do you know what’s happening out there?’

‘I have matters in hand.’

‘Do you? Do you really? Because to me it looks as if you’re ignoring the threat in the hope it will go away.’

Sixshot pulled a plasma rifle from behind the throne. ‘You never used to be this talkative, Soundwave.’

‘I’ve a lot to say nowadays. Oh, put the gun down, Sixshot.’

Sixshot radioed Octane: ‘The war room, now. We have a visitor.’

‘I’m not going anywhere.’

‘I can shoot you dead or have you removed. It’s your choice.’

‘The Quintessons have overrun our planet and you just sit there! They send thousands of ships to attack Polyhex, they lay waste to Darkmount, they firebomb hundreds of Decepticons, and you do nothing!’

Octane crashed into the room, followed by 15 others.

‘We were maintaining a tactical distance,’ said Sixshot. ‘We were waiting for the right time.’

‘People are dying while you wait for “the right time”! You could have tipped the balance; you could have won the war! It was your duty as a Decepticon! I know of infantrymen who would lay down their lives before you’d even lift a finger from that throne.’

‘I never took you for an orator.’ Sixshot gestured at the crowd. ‘Backtread! Terradive! Take him away.’

‘They’re not moving, Sixshot: you’ve lost them. You lost them the moment I walked in the door.’

‘Take him away! Anyone!’

‘Surrender now and I’ll kill you quickly.’

‘You seem to forget, Soundwave, that I am the one pointing a gun at you.’

‘Don’t disgrace yourself further. For the good of the Decepticons, you have to—’

‘Stop preaching! You have no idea of the full situation! The plans I’ve made, the strategies I’ve devised!’

‘Your mind says otherwise.’

‘You barge in here, telling me my duty, trying to turn my troops against me... Do you really think I’d hide in the shadows while Cybertron is swept from under my feet?’

Soundwave stared at the plasma rifle. ‘Pull that trigger and I guarantee that your troops will kill you before I hit the ground.’

Sixshot squeezed the trigger, and nothing happened. He stumbled backwards, amazed, as an empty charge fizzed inside the barrel.

Octane threw his weapon into Soundwave’s open hand, and the new Decepticon commander blew Sixshot’s chest open. The multi-changer screamed and tried to stem the sparks.

Frenzy emerged from behind the throne with an energon clip in his tiny black hands. He held it up like a trophy. ‘Worked a dream, boss.’

Soundwave pulled Sixshot to his feet and addressed the crowd. 'Your commander lied to you all. The Quintessons have taken over Cybertron and your comrades are dead because you did not go to their aid. And why did you not go? Because of Sixshot. I ask for your verdict - anyone that wants to see him spared, speak now. Anyone? Anyone care to save this robot's life?'

'Thought not.'

Soundwave plunged his fingers into Sixshot's forehead, squeezed the brain module to a wafer and turned to his army.

'Tool up. We're leaving.'

'They've probably been given their own lab complex now,' Pincher mumbled.

'You're not still harping on about Wheeljack and Sygnet, are you?' said Swerve, racking up test tubes.

'It's the cheek of it all. Wheeljack swans in, commandeers this lab and brings a Decepticon into our midst. We're relegated to background detail while they grab all the glory.'

'I sense envy in your voice. Where's your scientific detachment?'

'I detached it. They've forgotten about us, Pincher.'

'Nonsense. It's called being left alone to get on with our work. Wheeljack has the Inhibitor Chip, we have—'

'Glasses of water. Come on, Swerve, look at this sample! It's tap water, isn't it? They've given us a bottle-opening exercise.'

Fastlane walked in. 'Well, that was quite a presentation. Four hours. Now I know why Prime's speeches are so... infamous. I think that Terran robot, Centurion, slipped off-line with boredom. Shame you two couldn't make it.'

'We were busy,' muttered Pincher, '...with pointless tasks.'

'There's no-one better suited,' said Fastlane, looking up from the data-board he was scanning. 'Siren's handed command to Optimus Prime, by the way. A temporary arrangement, of course.'

Pincher crouched behind a tripod-mounted laser pistol and fired at the bracelet lock sealing an *aqua fortis* sample.

'Good shot,' said Swerve, holding up the uncapped vial as if proposing a toast. 'We'll run the necessary tests, Fastlane, but I think Pincher's right - it's water.' He poured a droplet onto his hand. The liquid burrowed through his palm and twisted smoke into the air. He screamed, dropped the test tube, and stared at his hole-punched hand.

'Patch him up,' snapped Fastlane, 'and get me a toxicological - quick.'

The quarantine pod was locked away in a disused room, where it simmered under ultraviolet light. This was out-of-bounds, this was no-go - this was where the dying came to die.

Prowl had been left to soak in a cocktail of antiviral nutrients. Corrodia Gravis had not been kind; Corrodia Gravis had not been pretty; Corrodia Gravis had devoured him with a ravenous hunger, with a boundless lust for techno-flesh that only anti-metallic bacteria could harbour. His arms shielded his torso parenthetically, cradling the damage within. His face was red with rust-sores and bacterial slump, as if he was embarrassed of his condition.

'He looks so peaceful,' said Chromedome. 'As if he's asleep.'

'There's far more peace in death than life.'

'Don't say that, Red Alert. He's not dead.'

'No, not yet. But soon. If Perceptor hadn't found him when he did...'

'He was face-down in a basement chamber,' said Perceptor. 'He'd broken into a specimen tube containing a CG victim.'

Chromedome rolled the words over his head as if he'd misheard. 'Prowl exposed himself to this disease? This was a suicide attempt?'

'I didn't say that,' Perceptor snapped. 'There must be a more plausible explanation.'

'We have to keep this secret,' said Red Alert gravely. 'The others are preoccupied with Kup.'

'I'm not surprised. He's acting very strangely. Have you seen him, shackled up in his quarters with Hot Rod's body? People say he talks to it.'



Perceptor peeled himself away from the quarantine pod. ‘Somebody change the subject,’ he sighed.

‘I’m hoping the nutro-bath will halt the spread of the infection,’ said Red Alert.

‘Can he be cured?’

‘I’m not qualified to make a proper diagnosis, Chromedome. I can’t even say what type of CG he’s contracted. Given the fact that we’re inside a viral research centre, it could be totally unique. Then it becomes a question of donor compatibility. Without the correct transplant tissue, he might as well be dead.’

‘I guess you’re in charge now, Perceptor,’ said Chromedome, moving to the door. ‘I’ve got to get back to the comms room. I dunno, maybe the others will make contact again.’

Red Alert let the programmer leave without comment. ‘So, Perceptor... what happens now?’

‘The matter transporter remains the most viable route of escape. Siren’s medical staff can tend to Prowl, even it means placing him in cold storage indefinitely.’ He noticed the look of Red Alert’s face. ‘You think this is likely?’

‘I gave Chromedome the happy-ending version just now...’

‘That was the *happy-ending* version?’

‘Prowl’s chances of survival are astronomically slim. Fighting a designer disease is virtually impossible.’

‘I hate to say it, but perhaps this *was* a failed suicide. In which case...’ Perceptor grappled with an unwanted thought. ‘In which case he might resent us reviving him.’ The comms-panel flashed on Perceptor wrist. ‘Yes, Chromdome?’

‘It’s me. You’d better get here straightaway.’

A few moments later Chromedome was beckoning Perceptor and Red Alert into the comms room. ‘You remember our concerns about Kup – that he may have been trailed by the Quintessons?’

‘We dismissed that when the rad-sweep zeroed out,’ said Red Alert, but he looked less confident than he sounded.

‘Yeah, well that was then; take a look at the radar now. I count over 500 blips.’

‘Kup’s killed us,’ said Red Alert. ‘We’re dead.’

‘Calm down,’ said Perceptor, who switched to inter-Autobot radio and began his address: ‘*This is a code red field warning. All troops proceed to the west-wing and prepare to engage enemy forces. The Quintessons have found us; repeat, the Quintessons have found us.*’

Moments later, dozens of Autobots ran outside, leaden with weaponry and twitching fingers. Kup took the lead, sweeping rotor-clip rail guns across the horizon and fighting the urge to strafe an empty sky.

Silhouettes appeared in the distance.

Perceptor transformed into his microscope mode and adjusted his magnification barrel. ‘It’s not the Quintessons,’ he declared. ‘It’s the Decepticons.’

‘Soundwave has led them right to our front door!’ choked Red Alert. ‘Get back down, Perceptor! You’re a target!’

‘I’m receiving a signal... Soundwave says he means us no harm. He proposes an alliance.’

‘Get down! It’s a trick!’

‘Maybe. But it’s time for some perspective.’ Perceptor transformed and carefully put down his weapon. ‘I’ve just told him that we accept.’

The storeroom was gaudy with polished gold surfaces, with reflections of reflections; everywhere, a glassware glare of bounced and bouncing light. Nondescript and brutally functional, the storeroom was nothing more than an architectural afterthought sandwiched between basement blocks at the bottom of the Quintesson Fortress. It was a dead-end with a door: no windows, no viewing galleries, no oh-so-convenient ducts or vent shafts.

True, Quantax would have preferred a run-down cell or a torture chamber (something nice and grimy, ideally with a VVH sparking away in the corner), but the storeroom would have to do. It was better than the control room, anyway, and it had a certain low-key hopelessness that the conference halls and antechambers lacked. Outside, in corridor 1A/001, foot soldiers, tech-heads and senior offices dashed from floor to floor carrying reports and ferrying messages, oblivious to the five people sealed off by a plain metal door.

The two guards flanked the doorframe, rifles like cummerbunds, happy to watch. In the centre of the room, Rev-Tone and Quark sat at a sturdy metallic table, their arms tied up behind their chairs. Inhibitor

claws peppered their backs like tarantulas, overcrowding their spines, fighting for unclaimed skin. Rev-Tone's mouthpiece was missing, revealing a rectangular mouth and awkward teeth. Quark's eyes were splintered. He could barely see.

Quantax completed 30 circuits of the room before cocking his head and saying, 'You know, I'd hoped it wouldn't get this far.'

Rev-Tone and Quark stared at the table, a garish mess of red/blue paint flecks. They hadn't looked at each other since Kup had run away with Hot Rod's body tucked under his arm. Quark's head was twitching.

'I won't pretend that hostage brutality is something I disapprove of, but it would have been far simpler if you'd told me what I wanted to know. Perhaps your two team-mates would have been more talkative.' He gestured towards the mishmash table. 'Too late to find out now.'

There was a lopsided, gurgling sound. Rev-Tone closed his eyes and felt a warm trickle of lubricant roll down his chin. Bad things were happening inside him.

'I know there are more of you out there, hiding on our planet, waiting to attack. All I need is a set of co-ordinates. Just give me six numbers and I'll let you both go. I'm not promising an everlasting reprieve, but you'll be airlifted from this base and dropped on your doorstep. We may even let you get inside before we open fire.'

Quantax was tired of talking. He disliked the sound of his own voice, especially when he was making threats. 'This isn't working, is it?' he said, and unclipped a laser pistol from the small of his back. He held the weapon at arm's length, slotted an energon clip into place and rolled the barrel settings. 'What is it with you Autobots?'

'You realise that killing us will solve nothing,' said Quark.

'Dear god, it speaks! I was beginning to think my men had ruptured your synthvox. Can your friend speak too?'

Rev-Tone looked up and mumbled something. His words were soft and shapeless.

Quantax moved forward. 'What was that?' He spread his hands, bent low and said, with faint hope, 'Are you trying to tell me something?'

Rev-Tone hacked a wad of oil into Quantax's face.

The Quintesson dabbed his cheek. 'You should know better.' He held the pistol close to Rev-Tone's head as the guards pinned him still. 'You've settled any doubts I had about using this.'

'Don't touch him!' yelled Quark, struggling to break free.

Rev-Tone felt the barrel scrape against his battered cerebral casing and said, 'Well? If you're going to shoot, shoot.'

Quantax pulled the trigger.

Quark screamed.

Rev-Tone heard a deafening click and realised he was still alive.

'Perhaps I should have explained this before,' said Quantax. 'This pistol is loaded with a one-shot charge, randomly primed. It's going to go of eventually, but who can say when?' He pointed the gun at Quark's head and looked at Rev-Tone. 'So. Where are the other Autobots?'

'Don't!' yelled Quark. 'Don't say anything!'

Rev-Tone stared at Quark's head and the black barrel hovering in wait. His circuitry burned. The Institute flashed through his mind.

Quantax squeezed the trigger – but nothing happened. Quark was still intact.

'What are the odds of that?' smiled Quantax, skirting the table, a skip in his step. He returned to Rev-Tone's brow.

'Don't say anything, Quark,' said Rev-Tone. 'I mean it.'

'Oh, don't listen to him!' interrupted Quantax. 'If you give me the location of your base, I'll let him live. I'll let you *both* live. He's your friend, Autobot! Now give me the co-ordinates.'

'Quark, no!'

Quantax squeezed the trigger and Rev-Tone buckled against a rush of silence. He rocked in his chair and prayed for a conclusion: anything to break the chain. A guard cupped his throat and forced him to watch Quantax put a gun to the back of Quark's head.

'I'm sorry,' said Rev-Tone, closing his eyes.

'Fourth time lucky?' said Quantax, and fired.

Quark's head disappeared in a shriek of shredded metal.

Rev-Tone suddenly realised that he was covered in oil. Quark's body wobbled in front of him; it had no shoulders, just a ragged semicircle above the stomach, as if someone had taken a bite. The back of his chair was missing. Rev-Tone started screaming. He was glad when his optical microfilaments began to weave comet-tails from his eyes: it meant he was finally blind to the horror.

Quantax was speaking and waving his hands, but his words were inaudible above Rev-Tone's banshee wail. He reloaded the laser pistol and fired another shot. The screaming stopped. Rev-Tone slumped in his chair, hunched over a hole in his chest.

'Again,' said Quantax. The guards repositioned the unconscious Autobot. 'We'll just have to find another way.' He squeezed the trigger and maintained pressure until Rev-Tone and the remains of his chair were indistinguishable.

Outside, in corridor 1A/001, foot soldiers, tech-heads and senior offices dashed from floor to floor carrying reports and ferrying messages, oblivious to the three people sealed off by a plain metal door.

The Institute had been carved up and shared out. Neutral territory had been divided up into the Autobot Zone and the Decepticon Zone, a yin/yang curve separating east from west. Nothing had been said; no one had mapped the boundaries: people just knew. The mutual distrust was polite and unspoken. Refugees mingled but did not connect, as if charged with magnetic repulsion. People looked in mirrors and over their backs, fondled holsters and checked locked doors. They leant closer to their neighbour and spoke differently, as if their words were italicised.

The Autobots talked about Prowl. The Decepticons talked about Sixshot.

The only overlap came at a command level. Perceptor and Soundwave talked as they walked side-by-side along the dividing line.

'Once the transmat has been customised we will have direct access to the Sonic Canyons,' said Perceptor.

'I can have Pounce and Wingspan assist your men. They have experience in localised teleportation.'

Perceptor looked up at him. 'What is it like outside?'

'Empty. Contrary to popular belief, Cybertron isn't swarming with Quintessons. We travelled here without incident.'

'Back in your cell you said the other Decepticons were dead.'

'No, you said that – or rather Prowl did. Where is he?'

'Off-line.'

'He let me go, you know.'

'I guessed.'

They walked into the comms-room, where Chromedome and Red Alert were sitting in front of the screen.

Soundwave, spreading his hands over the commport keys. 'Perceptor says you have something to show me.'

'We made mute contact with Delphi,' said Chromedome. 'Perhaps you could...?'

Soundwave shrank into cassette deck mode, landed neatly on the desktop and extended a tentative linkup cable. A crisp, full-colour picture melted on screen. Chromedome muttered 'unbelievable' as Fastlane looked up from his post and greeted them in quadrasonic stereo. Optimus Prime, Siren and Nightbeat appeared in the background.

'Thank Primus you're alive!' exclaimed Siren. 'We were so worried.'

Realising that no one else was going to ask the question, Chromedome said, 'Who is that standing behind you?'

'It's who you think it is,' replied Siren.

'My name's Optimus. I think we met once before, at a lecture.'

'Who is he?' repeated Chromedome. 'Some sort of clone?'

'No, I'm the, er, original.'

'Ask Perceptor,' snapped Nightbeat. 'But ask him later. We have more pressing concerns. Where *are* you?'

‘The Institute of Higher Programming,’ said Perceptor, ‘with the Decepticons. Soundwave is feeding this transmission. Siren, does Delphi have a matter transporter?’

‘Yeah, we have a standard field portal.’

‘Excellent. Our own portal will be operational in about 36 hours. Chromedome is sending transfix co-ordinates now. I propose that we relocate to Delphi as soon as possible.’

‘Agreed. The sooner you—’

Siren was cut short as the picture collapsed. Soundwave back-flipped into robot mode. ‘I cancelled the transmission in favour of a new signal,’ he explained. ‘It’s heavily scrambled and extremely weak. I’m patching in.’

Alien symbols scrolled across the screen, dense and unintelligible, and Chromedome fell upon the controls.

‘It’s a Quintesson mission log,’ said Red Alert once the message had been decrypted, ‘an inventory describing a dumping ground on the Polyhexian border. This is interesting... I’m getting something about Cybertronian “bodywaste”.’

‘If the Quintessons are dropping injured Transformers,’ said Chromedome, ‘we should collect.’

‘I agree,’ said Perceptor. ‘The waste site is a safe distance from the Quintesson fortress. I will despatch Getaway and Throwback to investigate.’

‘No,’ said Soundwave. ‘One Autobot, one Decepticon, and we bring back equal numbers.’

‘As you wish. But this is retrieval only. No enemy contact, no engagement, nothing.’

The midnight air gave the outskirts of Polyhex a paper-cut clarity, emphasising the silence synonymous with vast tracts of flattened space. A transit cruiser passed overhead, its spotlights picking out rubble and roofless buildings.

Throwback pressed his face against the ground and hoped Dirge was doing the same. He waited for the telltale tingle in his spine – a gentle alarm call before Quintesson lasers pummelled him into cut-out shapes – but nothing happened. The enemy ship shrank into the distance.

‘It’s okay,’ he said to his companion. ‘We’re clear.’

Dirge looked up. ‘Just a routine patrol ship, then,’ he said. ‘I’d hoped we might see some action.’

They were lying on the outskirts of a cluster-bomb crater that overlooked a dumping ground piled high with severed limbs and Tenderisers. A half-built recycling plant glimmered on the horizon like a string of pearls.

‘This is all new,’ Dirge said with quiet disbelief. ‘Everything’s changed. Sixshot described a different planet, one where you Autobots, although dying in your thousands, were slowly driving the Quintessons back. I suppose it was too perfect a picture.’

‘Quiet. Here comes another ship.’

An oblong craft nosed towards them and dropped its cargo. Throwback waited for the ship to amble away and then slid towards the debris.

‘I’ll keep watch,’ called Dirge, checking that the MARB that had brought them here was still within reach.

‘There’s nothing here,’ called Throwback, rifling through ammo shells and flame-throwers. ‘Just cast-offs and circuit boards.’

‘So this is a complete waste of time.’

‘Hang on, this looks promising.’ Throwback tugged at a splayed bouquet of wiring. One body part revealed another, and another, as if the earth was disclosing a coffin-less body, loose and undone. ‘He’s one of ours. His name’s Rev-Tone.’

‘Huh. Is he alive?’

‘I don’t know.’ Throwback picked up a skull wrapped in blistered alloy: scalp, cerebellum, visor, cheekbones, nose and nothing. The jaw was missing, torn loose and whipped deep into the pic ‘n’ mix scrap. He knelt to continue the excavation and heard the distant sound of engines.

Far off, framed by bold, uppercase architecture, an obese Quintesson landcruiser sloped into view.

‘Move it!’ ordered Dirge, jumping onto the MARB and throwing a battered container at Throwback’s feet. ‘Stash the body and split. I start flying the moment I finish this sentence.’

‘But there could be more of them,’ protested Throwback, running along the crater’s edge and dodging sweeping spotlights. He grabbed the rising MARB with one hand, flung the case at Dirge’s feet and scrambled on board. ‘What about Decepticon bodies?’

‘What about ‘em?’ Dirge transformed into jet mode and accelerated away from the dumping ground, leaving Throwback to pilot the MARB. The Autobot watched the Decepticon’s fag-end thrusters disappear and thumbed in co-ordinates for Korten.

‘Now,’ said Optimus Prime, ‘let’s try this again.’

Galvatron said nothing. He was still in his holding rack. When he moved, the sound of sparking limbs was delivered into the packed viewing gallery.

‘I am prepared to make you an offer. Information for freedom: a simple exchange. Tell me everything you know about Aquaria and I will set you free.’

‘Why should I trust you?’ Galvatron said at length. ‘Oh yes, because you’re the *legendary* Optimus Prime, miraculously resurrected! Autobot trickery. Very cheap, very tasteless. Prime died 25 years ago.’

‘So I’m led to understand.’

‘I killed him, you know. I pulled his fuel pump out through his throat and he was glad to die.’

‘Unlike you, Galvatron, I am not prone to exaggeration. So when I tell you that time is running out you would do well to listen. I’ve given you a choice, now give me an answer.’

‘Aquaria... is an ocean planet. The seawater is corrosive to Transformers. Xenon, the Quintesson commander, uses it as an instrument of torture.’

Siren closed the intercom and turned to the other spectators. ‘It’s worse that we imagined. I thought Swerve and Pincher were dealing with some kind of customised toxin, something artificial. How many planets did Xenon check out before finding that one?’

Prime re-opened channels. ‘And does this Xenon intend to travel to Cybertron?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘How many Quintessons are left on Aquaria?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Did Xenon discuss the Matrix with you?’

‘No.’

‘Did he discuss strategy?’

‘No.’

‘Did he—?’

‘This is hopeless,’ muttered Siren. ‘He knows less than we do.’

Nightbeat touched Prime’s arm. ‘Do you think Xenon has the Matrix?’

‘I doubt he would entrust it to any of his subordinates.’ Optimus turned to Siren. ‘I agree with you: there’s nothing else he can tell us. Have someone release him.’

Siren half-smiled. ‘You’re not serious.’

‘I gave him my word. He co-operated.’

‘But he told us nothing!’

‘That’s hardly the point.’

‘You’re right! He could have given us a hand-painted blueprint of the Quintessons’ headquarters, defused an Inhibitor Chip, transcribed Xenon’s masterplan and synthesised a cure for *corrodia gravis* I still wouldn’t loosen one single bolt on that rack! He’s a Decepticon, Optimus, and we’re—’

‘—Autobots. My point exactly.’

‘This is 2012! The Autobot Code is no longer binding: we make allowances these days. He’s the Decepticon leader! He’s responsible for the deaths of billions.’

‘You don’t need to remind me of Megatron’s war crimes, Siren: I lived them. His release is not a matter for debate.’ Optimus opened the door. ‘If you won’t free him I’ll do so myself.’

Moments later, Optimus appeared on the other side of the glass and began tending to Galvatron’s padlocks. ‘You’re free to go,’ he said.

Galvatron massaged his neck as the brace fell away. ‘So it *is* you. How did they bring you back?’

‘They have their methods. I will escort you from the base, and you can—’

‘What, Prime? What can I do? My forces are decimated and Darkmount’s in ruins. Much as I’d like to storm Polyhex and reclaim what’s mine, I cannot.’

‘What are you saying? You wish to remain imprisoned?’

‘A proposal: I join you – temporarily.’

‘An alliance? Freedom, yes, but collaboration...? I don’t know.’

‘Why do you hesitate? This is not the first time we have pooled our resources.’

‘It’s not?’

Rev-Tone’s body parts hit the floor like building blocks, too dull and dented to catch the light. Throwback hadn’t radioed ahead and so arrived at the Institute unannounced, his MARB hobbling with speed fatigue. Red Alert had taken one look at the container under Throwback’s arm and headed for the Reconstruction Harness (a.k.a. the Repair Chair), a straight-backed steadying frame used for heavy duty rebuilds.

Autobots and Decepticons swarmed into the makeshift medi-bay – a cold, scraped-clean parts centre underneath the Institute – to see what all the fuss was about. Perceptor pushed them back. Behind him, Throwback rubbed his forehead and Red Alert cherry-picked scattered limbs.

The crowd soon lost interest and dispersed, and the medi-bay resembled the aftermath of a party. Only the hosts remained, tired and over-emotional amid the metaphorical cans and ashtrays. Kup sat on a circuit slab, hands in his lap, staring at the reverse autopsy.

The door opened and Soundwave entered with a Decepticon of equal size and build. ‘Fulcrum here is a surgeon. He’s the best we have.’

‘Thank you, Soundwave.’ said Perceptor. It sounded strange.

‘We need all the troops we can get.’

Soon, Rev-Tone was taking shape. Like aeroplane wreckage, his remains had been arranged on the slab to give the illusion of completeness. Perceptor ferried body parts from slab to chair, stood back and watched Fulcrum cut, buzz and burrow, slowly adding layers to the skeleton.

The damage was patient and only revealed itself when ready. Paradoxically, the longer the operation, the less complete Rev-Tone became: only when two parts were brought close together did the missing link become apparent: an absent knee joint, half a forearm, a chest-plate torn by laserfire.

After several hours, Fulcrum attached Rev-Tone’s severed head to his shoulders. The Autobot had no jaw, and the interior of his vocal aperture was covered in scorch marks.

Fulcrum stood up and retracted his laser scalpel. ‘He’s ready.’

Red Alert administered slugs of hi-grade fuel as bio-scanners began searching for life signs. Kup crouched low, desperate to catch the first spark of life when it appeared behind Rev-Tone’s visor. In the end, though, it was not his eyes that betrayed his recovery; it was the sound of his one remaining hand tapping the arm of the Repair Chair.

Kup started laughing, a laugh that could not be controlled. Perceptor led him away.

‘Something’s wrong,’ said Throwback. The spasm in Rev-Tone’s hand had reached other parts of his body. ‘What’s happening to him?’

‘He’s in shock,’ said Fulcrum. ‘It’s a common reaction. Shall I shut him down?’

‘No!’ said Perceptor. ‘We may not be able to resuscitate him again.’ He knelt down beside the chair. ‘It’s all right, Rev-Tone, you’re safe. Can you hear me?’

Rev-Tone’s eyes shone like a dark and shifting spectrum. As he tried to speak, levers in his face pulled his cheekbones sideways. He grabbed a scalpel from a nearby tray and began hacking at his leg. Paint fell at his feet before a shocked Perceptor found the presence of mind to snatch the weapon away.

‘Is self-mutilation a recognised part of the repair process?’ Soundwave asked Fulcrum in all seriousness.

Before the surgeon could answer, Rev-Tone had grabbed another blade and started scratching his thigh. Perceptor yanked the blade and this time stood well back. The patient rocked in his chair, straining for another scalpel.

Soundwave unclipped his concussion blaster and unloaded an energon clip into Rev-Tone’s head and shoulders. Motors and servo-joints twitched with a life of their own, spinning like radar dishes, determined to outlive their host. This time Rev-Tone would not be coming back.

Red Alert and Kup brought Soundwave to the ground before his finger had surrendered the trigger. Perceptor kicked his concussion blaster aside and pressed a gun under the Decepticon's chin, itching to fire.

'Give me one good reason why I shouldn't pull this trigger!'

The medi-bay shook and a thin shower of grit fell from the ceiling.

Chromedome's voice sounded distant and tinny on the Tannoy: '*We have a Quintesson air fleet heading this way. Those were the first of the long-range missiles.*'

'As I thought,' said Soundwave. 'Look at the scratches on Rev-Tone's leg. What do they say?'

Throwback kept Fulcrum at gunpoint as he studied the physical graffiti. 'What do they say? Nothing. They're meaningless. Rev-Tone was deranged.'

'The Quintessons used Rev-Tone as a plant, you idiot. They put a lifetracer inside his brain module. It's a bug that transmits location. Normally used by infiltrators. The host is aware of its presence.'

Perceptor climbed off Soundwave. 'They let him live. They wanted us to detect the transmission...'  
He stared at Rev-Tone's remains and the letters he had scratched onto his thigh: 'ifetrac'.

'Would you stop doing that? Please? It's rather off-putting.'

'I wasn't looking at you,' said Swerve, staring through the keyhole in his hand. 'I'm assessing damage.'

Pincher poured another sample into a shallow glass basin. They had made slow progress. Running tests on *aqua fortis* was difficult, not least because all non-glass instruments dissolved on contact. Pincher's studies now focused on the composition of the Quintesson test tube, which he was convinced held the key to synthesising a resistant alloy.

He worked, as always, in his Pretender suit, welcoming the extra insulation. He thought of his old partners, Doubleheader and Longtooth, both of them now dead. They'd urged him to join them in Iacon but he had declined, bewitched by the prospect of running his own lab in Delphi. Now, surrounded by glassware and bubbling liquids, he wondered if he'd made the right choice. What had he achieved?

Swerve handed him the latest tox report, a codex of dispiriting blanks and dashes. 'I've cross-referenced the bio-signature with everything on file and there's no match. Any luck with the tube?'

'Well, it's not made of glass. There's definitely traces of metallic sediment - a hybridised element that renders it immune from corrosion. But it's like working in the dark, you know? I need a frame of reference.'

Then, without warning, Galvatron appeared in the doorway. Swerve saw the Decepticon's reflection in the monitor screen and swung around to confront him. He shouted a warning to Pincher and reached for his cryo-gun, dropping the test tube. Pincher screamed as the *aqua fortis* sample smashed against his chest plate and discharged its corrosive venom.

Optimus Prime barged past a bemused Galvatron and knelt alongside Pincher, who was cradling his chest on the floor. 'Are you hurt?' he demanded, annoyed that he did not know the scientist's name.

Pincher relaxed, suddenly aware that he wasn't in any pain. 'Yes,' he said, surprised that he could still talk. He dabbed his wet chest, rubbed his fingers and watched the liquid trickle harmlessly down his Pretender shell.

The first batch of Tridents was already peeling the Institute off the planet's crust. Windows dissolved or burst their banks, helpless against the surge of superheat. Ceilings collapsed and walls dominoed into one another. Troop carriers touched down nearby, split open and released Sharkticon squads. The foot soldiers marched through richly cratered fields, oblivious to the gunfire above their heads.

Chromedome shot out of the comms room, buoyed by flame, and collided with the far wall. Red Alert pulled him from the dent. 'Did you get a message to Siren?' he asked.

'Yeah. They're ready to receive.'

'Go downstairs and help Perceptor with the teleporter.'

'Where are you going?'

'Soundwave and I are spreading the word.'

There were no divisions now, no borderlines or exclusion zones: both sides mixed without thinking. They tensed and relaxed communally, attuned to the rhythms of war, waiting for the cluster bomb that

would reduce the Institute to cinders. Soon, Transformers of all colours and sizes were filling up the downstairs hangar. Perceptor screamed as the teleporter refused to power up. Pounce stood behind a lectern and wrestled with controls while Wingspan's feet poked out from dismantled engine casing.

Two stasis pods had become detached from the main crowd and been abandoned like lost luggage. Only the Decepticons peered inside, as intrigued by the concept of preservation as the identity of the off-liners. Prowl and Hot Rod stared back with glazed eyes. Hot Rod was an embalmed fossil, caked in crust. Prowl was stewing in a feroclhoride syrup.

Wingspan rolled clear, Pounce thumped the lectern, and a ring of fairytale lights appeared around the portal. Energy raced to fill the gaps, stretching like cling-film or soapy water.

Outside, everything went quiet.

'The ground troops are moving in,' said Frenzy, eager to dispel any false hopes.

'About 900, to be precise,' added Soundwave as he led the final batch of Autobots and Decepticons into the hangar. 'They're advancing on the west wing.'

'Why don't we stand and fight?' demanded Razorclaw, looking around for support. 'We can take them!'

'But could we take the second wave?' asked Soundwave. 'Or the third? Or the fourth?'

'A counter-attack would be suicide,' agreed Perceptor. 'We have an opportunity to preserve our forces and relocate.' For a moment, listening to the sneers and grumbles in the crowd, he imagined what it had been like for Prowl. 'Of course those of you wishing to preserve this valuable strategic standpoint are welcome to stay behind and fight.'

'Co-ordinates are set,' announced Pounce. 'We're ready to go.'

Pincher and Swerve found Siren in the corner of the shuttle hangar, chatting to Nightbeat beside a dusted-down teleportal. An Autosshuttle and six MARBs had been pushed to the side of the hangar to clear space, as if a runaway train would burst from the portal and pile up.

'What's the matter?' asked Nightbeat, meeting the sprinters halfway. 'Is it Optimus?'

'No!' said Pincher. 'The liquid samples from Aquaria...'

'We were running tests,' interrupted Swerve, 'and Galvatron walked in, and—'

'The liquid doesn't harm Pretenders!' finished Pincher quickly, eager to reach the end of his report before his partner.

In the background, the portal was filled with pale green energy. No one noticed.

'It's because my Pretender shell is biomechanical,' continued Pincher. 'It's a synth-suit.'

'Can you extrapolate a formula to create a protective alloy?' asked Siren, ignoring the warmth on his back.

'Yes, given time. But it's simpler to recreate the Pretender process and generate a fresh set of shells.'

'I wore a shell for several months,' Nightbeat said to Siren, as if recommending the procedure. 'I'm sure Delphi has the necessary equipment. We may even have access to the original shell designs... Is it getting hot in here?'

Red Alert burst through the energy portal like a cannon ball, stretching the transwarp energy into phosphorous streams. He landed with a roll, weapon in hand. As the others rushed to his aid, the portal disgorged a second figure, Dirge, and a third, Throwback.

Perceptor beckoned Scattershot and Lightspeed to the run-up point. The hangar was emptying fast but the gunshots outside were growing louder. He knew the Sharkticons had reached the upper level, but he didn't know whom they were firing at – probably the shadows, or each other.

Behind him, Autobots and Decepticons lined up and dashed towards the cathode scowl of a teleporter in flux. They leapt headfirst into the whirlpool, breaking the surface like bullets.

Kup jumped the queue, pushing Hot Rod's hovering stasis pod into Lightspeed's launch path.

'Somebody get him out of the way before I shoot him,' ordered Soundwave, and took Perceptor aside. 'We outnumber you Autobots two-to-one. The jump queues should reflect this: two Decepticons leave, then one Autobot.'



'Where is the logic in that?' spat Perceptor, trying to keep his eye on the shifting patterns of people. Prowl's stasis pod drifted towards a dark corner of the room like an inflatable dinghy.

'You haven't got time to argue!'

Chromedome, meanwhile, was pushing Transformers towards the portal, having calculated how long it was taking for the energy disc to reassert itself (an imperfection in the warpgate makeup, said Perceptor, could send someone's legs to Hydru 4). He filtered teleporteers in quick succession.

'They're closing in,' called Frenzy from the corridor. 'I just clipped a Sharkticon; his pals won't be far behind!'

Swindle crashed into Delphi with his forearms locked over his face. Afterburner came next, then Finback, then Fulcrum, then Leadfoot, then Vortex...

Perceptor pushed Prowl's rogue stasis pod to the back of the queue.

Kup ran to the door and traded shots with imaginary Sharkticons, blasting anything – shadows, debris patterns, scorch lines – that didn't conform to recognisable shape.

The hangar was almost empty now. A final cluster of Decepticons prepared to leap.

...Pounce, Wingspan, Rippersnapper, Desolate, Fireball, Snipe, Retread, Skyslash, Sledgehammer, Bristleback, Countershot...

The Institute was down to four Transformers and 900 Quintessons. Perceptor pushed Prowl's pod through the portal with one hand and stood behind the lectern controls. Soundwave and Chromedome bounded up.

'Everyone accounted for,' said Chromedome. 'We're clear. No 'Bots or 'Cons except us. Kup! Come over here: we're leaving.'

Kup squeezed off a final round, discarded a smoking energon clip, and jogged over.

'See you on the other side,' nodded Soundwave, and dived to safety.

Chromedome beckoned to Perceptor. 'After you, commander.'

'I'm not going.'

'Excuse me?'

'Someone needs to stay behind to deactivate the teleportal. If not, the Quintessons will continue their pursuit.'

'Not a problem. We'll blow the Delphi portal once we're across and collapse the bridge.'

'It won't work. The Quintessons will work out where you've jumped by reading the co-ordinates on this side.'

'Well what if we... if we...'

'There's no alternative, Chromedome.'

'Nonsense! We can think our way out of this.'

'Jump. I will remain here and cover your tracks. That's an order. I assumed leadership; all this is my responsibility.'

'If you stay here you're dead. We've already lost Rodimus and Prowl. We need you!'

'With Optimus Prime a few metres away? I don't think so.'

'I don't know what you guys are arguing about,' said Kup. 'I'm staying behind.'

Chromedome slapped his head. 'What is this, Self-sacrifice Day? Why can't we just— er, Kup, what are you doing?'

'I'm saving your lives,' said Kup, pointing his weapons at Perceptor and Chromedome. 'Don't try and stop me.'

'You're saving as at gunpoint?'

'You're not thinking clearly,' said Perceptor, trying to hold Kup's flickering gaze. 'You need to offline for a while. Things haven't been easy for you lately.'

'I know they haven't. And they're not gonna get any easier.' Kup lowered his guns. 'Leave me behind. I need to do this, Perceptor. For the first time in my life, I'm truly tired.'

'You'll regenerate. You always do.'

'Not this time. I've had enough. I just want this to end – permanently.'

Chromedome saw the sadness in his eyes and knew that there was no persuading him. 'Matrix guide you,' he said, and jumped through the portal.

'If there is nothing I can do to change your mind...' said Perceptor (ever-awkward with goodbyes, especially final ones).

'Give Hot Rod a proper send off, and if you ever see Prowl just tell him... tell him that I...'

'I know. Matrix guide you, Kup.'

Perceptor disappeared into the warp gate and Kup erased the co-ordinates. The energy dissolved, revealing a dirty hangar wall. Alone in a deserted room, he picked up a weapon for the last time, checked his ammunition clip and walked to the door. Grubby red laserbeams rippled down the corridor like taillights at high speed.

He'd often wondered what this moment would be like. He always knew it wouldn't be circuitburn that got him; not for him the dubious comfort of lying on a recharge slab on some retirement barge until his cobwebbed brain flamed itself out. He thought about the things he had and hadn't done, and the amount of both surprised him.

Where to start? Fighting Shrikebats, tunnelling into the bowels of Nilliad 3, ferrying refugees from Pequod's penal colony – three of a thousand off-world missions, each one revolving around him. Closer to home, he remembered spending pre-war days as a vaculift repairman, watching old friends grow frail as the energon rationing reached Mismia; he remembered shooting a Decepticon for the first time and gagging at the shock; meeting up with Blurr and Hot Rod; fighting off the mode-lock and the body-seizures and the fever-dreams and all the other things that came with old age; trying to just keep up, you know, with the pace of things; letting Fort Max persuade him to become a Targetmaster because it involved the most superficial binary bonding; going on interstellar diplomatic missions to undo the Empire's damage; counselling Hot Rod as he started to display the Signs of Affinity; breaking down in synth-shock only a few weeks ago when Ratchet told him that after years of patient reconstitution, his servos were now simply beyond repair.

He didn't want to die. Not really. Not when it came to the crunch. Not if he had a *choice*. The trouble was, it was only now – with the portal in flames and the gun was in his hand and the Quintessons tumbling toward him – it was only now that he realised this. He didn't want to die; but it was better to die, he told himself, than to live another 60 million years.

'Thank you, and goodnight,' he said, and stepped outside.

Perceptor opened his eyes as the warpgate collapsed. He blinked away the neon echo, absorbed the relocation lag, and adjusted to a crisp white room filled with dozens of Autobots and Decepticons.

'Hello,' he said, accepting Nightbeat's hand. 'We just thought we'd drop by.'

On the other side of Cybertron, inside a Lonium temple, the wormhole was growing. Agitated and shiftless and gorging on space-time, it unfurled with fitful urgency. Everything was fodder; everything surrendered to its tendrils. It was nearing the end of its lifespan, and couldn't decide whether to collapse or explode. At its heart, however, it was still. Amid the flux and dry-weave fractals was 1984, waxed with a Polaroid gloss.

Outside, beyond the roughshod plateau, beyond the greying plains and ash-kissed ruins, a Quintesson squad ploughed through Lonium. Had they looked up, they'd have seen that the sky was smudged with a strange light, vibrant and soiled and 30 years old.

In the corner of Delphi's entrance foyer, Nightbeat took his friend aside. 'Are you okay, Siren? You look ill.'

'Who, me? I'm fine.' He stepped aside to allow the Constructicons to filter past. 'I dunno, Nightbeat, doesn't this make you... uncomfortable?'

'What, you mean all these Decepticons?'

'Yes! I don't trust Soundwave. I feel that we're being used.'

'If I were a harsher robot I'd say you were just upset to see your base overrun.'

'Well perhaps I am. I'll miss this place. What's the point of a secret Autobot outpost that's no longer secret?'

'You talk as if things will go back to normal. Can you really see the Quintesson occupation coming to an end?'

'You don't think it will?'

'Not the way we want it to. I can see them whittling us down gradually, grinding away until we're down to a hundred, then 50, then ten...'

'This isn't the kind of conversation I need right now.' He looked around. 'Where's Optimus?'

'Still in the hangar, taking questions. They treat him like some sort of god. Did you see the way the crowd parted when he came in? Even the Decepticons...'

At that moment, the robot in question spoke through the corridor speakers: *'All Transformers to attend a compulsory check-up in the medi-bay and then convene in the war chamber. Decepticons unfamiliar with the base layout can approach the "Micro-Masters", who will be happy to give directions.'*

Siren shook his head. 'This is getting too surreal.'

'Nightbeat?' In a doorway across the corridor, above two-dozen bobbing heads, Perceptor balanced on his toes to catch the investigator's attention. He beckoned with an anxious hand, reluctant to say anything in case he was overheard.

'I've been waiting for this,' said Nightbeat, following Perceptor inside the sci-lab and locking the door behind him.

'Take a seat,' said Perceptor.

'Why are you calling me aside like this? It seems like only last week that you and Prowl were making me feel uncomfortable in the Archives Centre.'

'A lot's changed since then. Congratulations, by the way, on a successful mission.'

'Successful? I lost Grapple, Hoist and Sunstreaker.'

'I am sorry to hear that.' Perceptor sat down and folded his arms. 'But what was the wormhole like?'

'Pretty unspectacular. It reminded me of a standard warp gate.'

'What did it look like?'

'It was surrounded by some sort of flux-field and blurred around the edges. Stop frowning at me, Perceptor, it's unnerving. What's the matter?'

'It sounds as if it's nearing the end of its gestation. Soon it will seal itself up or explode. Either way, the effects could be cataclysmic.'

Nightbeat shrugged. He'd heard enough end-of-the-world scenarios in his time; they didn't shock him anymore.

'We need someone to guard the wormhole, Nightbeat. Can you imagine the havoc the Quintessons would cause if they had access to a time machine?'

'Unlike us Transformers, who merely generated a space/time rift and nearly destroyed all creation.'

'I'm serious. The Quintessons would act recklessly, irresponsibly.'

'Like plundering history for messianic ex-leaders.'

'Nightbeat!'

'Okay, okay, you're right. I'll take Prime back to 1984 and collapse the link.'

'Prime's not going anywhere. The Alliance would fall apart without him. We're seriously outnumbered by the Decepticons, but Optimus somehow redresses the balance. He's like a figurehead: he symbolises everything that—'

'He's not some shiny mascot you can wave at the enemy!'

'My point is that Prime and Prime alone can lead us against the Quintessons. Do you think I could? Or Siren? Galvatron's demented. Ultra Magnus is drifting through space.'

'Optimus could get killed out here. What if we launch an assault on their Fortress? You think he's going to sit indoors while we risk our necks? No, he'll be on the front line, dodging gunfire like the rest of us. What if he dies, Perceptor?'

'He won't: his survival is pre-ordained. He has to get back to 1984 so as to partake in the mass regeneration. Without that event we wouldn't be sitting here having this discussion. We've been through all this before.'

‘Yes, and I’ll say it again: you can’t make presuppositions about time. What you’re saying... what you’re saying is that out here, in 2012, he’s immortal!’

‘Effectively, yes. He can be hurt, maimed and disassembled, but he cannot die. He might walk back through that wormhole leaving a peaceful Cybertron and a thriving Transformer Alliance; he may crawl back as the last surviving Transformer, fleeing a planet ruled by Quintessons. Either way, he will survive, and he will return to the Past. I guarantee it.’

‘Yeah, well give Prime your guarantees.’

‘...and *this* is all you have to show for it?!’ Quantax help up Kup’s headless, limbless torso, charred like a hunk of overcooked meat. ‘I despatch 200 Tridents, enough Sharkticons to devour an army, and *this* is what you bring back?!’

The squadron leaders wouldn’t look Quantax in the eye.

‘This planet,’ he continued, ‘is being buffed and scrubbed, but while there are Autobots at large it cannot be properly cleansed. How can I map out the future when bands of dirty, backward Cybertronians are scurrying across the blueprints, smudging the ink?’

‘They used a some sort of teleporter to escape,’ said Q-715 feebly.

‘Shut up, all of you.’

The squadron leaders stared at the floor while armed guards attached Inhibitor Claws to their spinal struts.

‘I’m not going to kill you,’ said Quantax. ‘You’ll be transferred to Kledji and imprisoned. The Autobots have contaminated you, and it sickens me.’

He watched them leave and was glad to be alone. He felt energised. Until now, his power had been directed outwards; by turning it against his own troops he gave it a new edge, a new weight and tension. He knew now that his troops could be set against one another by nothing more than the tone of his voice.

He opened a sub-space channel and spoke to Xenon. ‘When will the new troops be ready, the “superbreed”? I need more men. The planet is too big to adequately patrol.’

‘You have the last of the old army under your command, Quantax. There will be no more reinforcements.’

‘But you said the next generation were practically on-line.’

‘The new Seedlings will not be warriors, Quantax. They’ll be philosophers and scientists and theologians.’

‘Yes, yes, but you can create a second batch, designed purely to attack and defend. Super-warriors!’

‘These creatures are not churned out on a conveyor belt! I refuse to create toy soldiers for your personal amusement.’

‘But we need fighters to expand the Quintesson Empire.’

‘What Quintesson Empire? We only need one planet! We have a homeworld, and soon we will have the Quintessons to populate it.’

‘Won’t the Sharkticons ruin this glorious utopia?’

‘The Sharkticons are not part of the bigger picture. They will be smelted down and recycled into light fittings or door stops. There will be no conflict on New Quintessa, only trade. Our warring days are over. Is that understood?’

‘Yes, my Lord.’

‘Good. Because I sincerely hope, General, that you don’t go the way of the Sharkticons.’

After days of backbreaking work, New Quintyxia’s first recycling plant was complete.

Sharkticons rounded Grade As into manageable groups, ready for the transfer back to Kledji. The prisoners shuffled their feet and opened their mouths, kept their place and said nothing. The occasional flame leapt from the lava pit, curled in mid-air and put itself out.

Ryknia stood on the edge as if daring the heat to bubble his paintwork. The recyc plant (a smelting pool by any other name) meant nothing to him, and he took no pride in its completion. He had not designed it: subterranean architects on Aquaria had done that. He had not commissioned its construction:

Xenon had, via Quantax. He had not built it: the framework had been erected by a sprawling team of Sharkticons and Reddies.

Closing his eyes, he remembered a past life: a different body, a different purpose. He used to tear down cities, not erect them; he used to spearhead global bombing raids, not rehab programs. For the first time since leaving Aquaria, he felt a twitch of unease. The planet was theirs: good. But what now?

He opened his wrist-comm and said, 'Quantax? The Recycling Plant is complete and operational.'

'Excellent. Gather your troops and move on to the old Sirrom Mining Complex. I've found a perfect site for the second plant.'

'Second plant? What are you talking about? I'm standing on a smelting pool the size of a birthing field and you want us to start building another? We don't need two!'

'Correct. We need hundreds, one on every border, ready to melt every scrap of useless metal on this planet!'

'No. I refuse. I'm not a glorified sub-contractor.'

'You cannot "refuse". You'll do as I say or you die. If I so much as click my fingers you'll be stripped and boiled in acid.'

Flame curved through the air and landed at Ryknia's feet. He stepped back from the brink. 'I understand, General. Ryknia out.' He wrung his hands and fought the urge to re-establish contact. A voice nearby broke the spell.

'Lieutenant Ryknia, sir, one of the Reddies has collapsed.'

Sharkticons had crowded round Spooler's body. The other Grade As made no attempt to intervene as Ryknia checked the Decepticon's tiny eyes for life-signs.

'It's dead,' said Ryknia, looking up at the crowd. 'Who did this?'

'No one, sir. It just toppled over. Honestly.'

'Hmm. No blast marks or lesions.' He pressed his fingers along Spooler's spinal strut, searching for a wound. The back of the Decepticon's neck was oddly textured, as if a message had been written in Braille. He tossed the body into the smelting pool, where it purpled like an aging bruise and dissolved.

'Fatigue,' Ryknia declared, turning to the Sharkticons. 'Pack up and return to Kledji.'

Soundwave closed the cell door and folded his arms. 'This is an unusual place to meet,' he said quietly. A week ago he wouldn't have dreamed of opening a conversation with Galvatron in such a flippant way, but commandeering the Decepticon army had boosted his self-confidence. He was reluctant to slide back into second place.

'No one will bother us here,' said Galvatron. 'What use is a prison cell when everyone's on the same side?' He picked up his old neck brace and wondered where to start. He wasn't used to talking to people, not even his second-in-command. All too often conversation was seen as a sign of companionship, and companionship a sign of weakness. Besides, the voices in his head usually kept him company. 'What happened, Soundwave?'

Soundwave described the Polyhex Massacre, the fall of Darkmount, the routing of the Autobot resistance cell and the missing Matrix, embellishing his summary with first person accounts lifted directly from witnesses' minds.

'What happened to Sixshot?'

'I killed him.'

'Oh? Why? On second thoughts, it doesn't matter. I'm sure you had your reasons. I'm more concerned with the reappearance of Optimus Prime. Is it really him?' Galvatron looked away quickly, embarrassed by the emotion in his voice.

'I cannot say. The Autobots I have scanned so far are just as surprised to see him as we are. "Optimus" certainly believes he is the genuine article.'

'With he and I in command we will crush the Quintesson squatters.' Galvatron nudged metal shavings with his foot. 'You know, Soundwave, there are occasions...' He looked up suddenly, as if it was someone else who had spoken.

'You were saying, commander?'

'Nothing. Dismissed.'

The command, usually given in a cavernous throne room or on the bridge of an imperial cruiser, seemed almost comical now. Soundwave waited, sensing that their chat was not over. 'It makes you think,' he said, testing the water. 'We know that co-operation is possible between us and the Autobots. Perhaps...'

'Perhaps what?'

'Have you ever considered making peace with the Autobots?'

Galvatron's face slumped like an avalanche: incomprehension mixed with terrible sadness, as if he had been betrayed but could not work out how. For a moment, Soundwave recognised Megatron – the old Megatron. He saw an expression he hadn't seen since before the Great War, when the Decepticon campaign was in its infancy, when Megatron would sit in empty halls, on the rim of battered stages, wondering if he would ever fuse Cybertron's dissenters and sociopaths into a cohesive army. He'd witnessed doubt in Megatron's eyes, but never Galvatron's – until now.

'Is it time to end the war, commander?'

Galvatron suddenly doubled up in pain. He coughed sparks at the floor and clawed at the base of his neck. After a few moments the pain faded and he relaxed, but something was wrong: his arm was frozen in mid-transformation.

'Tell no one about this,' he said, watching his musculature gradually re-assert itself.

From above, the Sonic Canyons were as pale and deserted as the rest of Cybertron; nothing more than a minor network of gorges offering geological variation: cerulean cliffs instead of frozen oceans and squinting tungsten. Squeezed inside the cliff, insulated by layers of sky-scraping radium, Delphi's war chamber was full to capacity. The Decepticons dominated three quarters of the room, their paintwork melting into a block of grey-blue and ultramarine, while the Autobots were reduced to a red and white minority. This fact did not go unnoticed by anyone.

Sygnel was lost amongst larger, sterner Decepticons on a distant balcony. He bore the expression of someone who'd been shown to the wrong seat but was too afraid to say anything. Nightbeat sat in the front row, listening as Red Alert described the slaughter of AMC1 with trance-like solemnity. To his left, Chromedome and Mainframe also compared recent histories. Their conversation was peppered with buzzwords and jargon so technically dense that Nightbeat couldn't help taking an interest, and so he found himself flitting between headless patients and the best way to sat-bounce scrambled messages using a low-grade cyadene modulator.

The five highest-ranking Transformers on the planet sat on stage and talked amongst themselves while the audience settled down. Optimus Prime sat amongst Galvatron, Soundwave, Siren and Perceptor. He gestured for the chamber to be silent.

'It is many years since I have addressed a crowd containing some of the faces I see before me today. Although the events leading to this historic alliance are not as I would have chosen, the fact remains that we sit here today, Autobot and Decepticon, as one. Whatever the motivation, that alone is to be applauded.'

He looked over the crowd as he spoke, amazed at the scope and variation of his race, from miniature Transformers, half-hidden in the aisles, to Transformers with soft, organic faces. These strangers met his gaze with aggressive familiarity, as if was he addressing them and them alone.

'The Quintessons have control of our planet. It really is as simple as that. Soon, Ultra Magnus will arrive with a team of Autobots, and that will be it: everyone will be accounted for. The question that now arises, the question that has no doubt plagued each and every one of you since you sat down, is this: what do we do now?'

'We should take the initiative and attack!' yelled Razorclaw from his balcony seat. 'This "Aquaria" sounds like the Quintesson heartland. Why not take the battle there?'

Optimus shrugged. 'We need to recover the Matrix. If that involves sending troops to Aquaria, so be it.'

Razorclaw settled down, unsure whether his point had been accepted or dismissed.

Blastmaster raised his hand. 'Optimus, Aquaria is covered in corrosive liquid. The Quintessons' base must be underwater. How do we get in?'

'There is a way to protect ourselves from *aqua fortis*,' said Perceptor. 'Pretender shells are immune.'

‘That doesn’t solve the problem of reaching the base,’ said Nightbeat, speaking to Optimus as if was the only other person in the room. ‘Surely our shuttle will be shot down the moment it breaches Aquarian airspace.’

Centurion, tucked between Technobots in the fourth row, raised his hand. ‘There’s an undamaged Trident in the Rust Sea,’ he said, almost apologetically, as if someone more experienced should have spoken first.

‘He’s right,’ said Mainframe. ‘It crashed near the Terbium shoreline.’

Optimus sank back in his chair. ‘So we have a means of infiltration. I need volunteers to travel to the Rust Sea and recover this Trident.’

Every Autobot raised his hand. The Decepticons did not move.

Ryknia turned loops in the air, preening himself. The planet’s curve flattened like a relaxing scanline, the air lost its arctic tang, and the Manganese Mountains zoomed closer. The air was humid and dew-soaked, the sky crammed with fume-clouds and run-off stains. Mount Edeus, once rainbow-gold, was now fermenting in a haze of greasy pollutants.

He rolled onto the landing strip, deserted save for a pair of Quintessons patrolling the perimeter. The entrance hall inside the mountain was covered in red footprints and crates full of unused Inhibitor Chips. He took a short cut through the spray chambers and found Jolup closing the door on a descending staircase.

‘Making any progress?’

Jolup stiffened. ‘Oh, a little. You know. Slow but significant.’

They looked at each other for a moment. ‘You’ll have to show me sometime,’ said Ryknia, and then: ‘Sevax reported twelve Grade Cs missing: more than your normal ration.’ He craned his neck to see what Jolup was hiding. ‘What’s that on the door?’

‘What, this? It’s a padlock. Cold-set and motion-frozen, with state-of-the-art internal clampdown mechanisms and three layers of tenium alloy. There, happy?’

‘What are you playing at? All three of us are supposed to have Downstairs access.’

‘Calm down. It’s not designed to keep you out: it’s designed to keep them in.’

Ryknia laughed and led the way upstairs, where Sevax was dragging a corpse from an open cell. ‘There’s another one on cell block seven,’ he said, checking his hands for paint. ‘We heard this one scream and found him hanging from his chains. What the hell is going on?’

Ryknia crouched by the body and massaged its neck. ‘Good question. One of my work-team died today. It had the same pattern on the back of his neck as this one. I think the Inhibitor Chip is exploding inside their brains. I think it’s an unforeseen side effect.’

‘Damn it! This is all we need!’

Jolup punched him playfully on the arm. ‘Calm down, Sevax. It’s only a couple of Reddies. What’s the matter?’

‘There’s something else,’ said Sevax quietly. ‘I need to talk to you both privately.’ He led them to the control room and pointed to a steel-plated sarcophagus. ‘It’s a bodyscanner. I found it underneath the remains of the Decepticon base.’

‘What were you doing there?’ asked Ryknia. ‘First Jolup starts padlocking the stairs, and then you go gallivanting across New Quintyxia collecting Decepticon trash. Am I the only one without a hobby?’

‘I went there to look for information on our host bodies.’

Jolup slumped into a chair. ‘You’re not still going on about that, are you? Why not just write a poem about it and move on?’

‘He’s right, Sevax. It’s getting tiresome.’

‘It just bothers me, okay? So you two don’t care about where these bodyscanners came from. So it doesn’t bother you that I can’t find ID codes or medical scans anywhere in the Decepticon mainframe...’

‘Don’t tell me,’ said Jolup. ‘You want to download our body stats, go back to Polyhex and double-check.’

‘It’ll take two minutes inside the scanner. It doesn’t hurt.’

Ryknia nodded with weary resignation. ‘Okay. Fine. Anything to shut you up.’ He stepped inside the bodyscanner and emerged a few moments later feeling slightly disoriented. He staggered into the anteroom and saw that the comms port was pulsing with an incoming message.

‘What are you doing at the Kledji base, Ryknia?’ snapped Quantax before his image had even stabilised. ‘You’re supposed to be building another Recycling Plant!’

‘I’m gathering a new workforce. What do you want?’

‘A convict ship. I have some new prisoners for you.’

‘Autobot or Decepticon?’

‘Quintesson.’

‘What have they done to deserve imprisonment?’

‘Just send the ship, Ryknia.’

‘This place is for Cybertronians, not our own troops.’

‘You don’t run Kledji. You’re caretakers at best.’

‘That’s rich coming from someone whose job it is to keep Xenon’s seat warm. Enjoy the power trip while you can, Quantax.’

‘I could have 10,000 commanders above me and I’d still be *your* superior. Now send a convict ship before I have you hunted down and dismantled. Is that understood? Good. Quantax *out*.’

‘What was all that about?’ asked Jolup, staggering in.

‘Quantax is losing it. He wants us to imprison a dozen Quintessons.’

‘So?’

‘So where does he go from here? How long before he throws another squad or two in jail? It’s a textbook case of megalomania. And that’s twice now he’s threatened to kill me. Where do we draw the line?’

‘I know what you’re thinking, but Quantax has got an entire army to back him up.’

‘Rubbish. Once you get past the tech-heads and first officers, the Quintesson army is comprised of mindless automatons willing to follow whoever has the biggest gun and the loudest voice.’

‘So what do you propose we do?’

‘Now? We send Quantax his ship, of course. There’s no need to be rash, after all. We have all the time in the world.’

‘Optimus! You startled me.’ Cloudraker dismissed his surprise with a wave of his hand and let Prime into Delphi’s medi-bay. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘A good question. I wish I knew. I felt that something down here demanded my attention.’ He looked around at the circuit slabs and the other medics, Fulcrum and Aragon. CPU monitors and touch-sensitive polymer screens flashed diagnostics onto rows of drugged-up patients. In the background, stasis pods were stacked so high that they reached the viewing gallery.

‘Not everyone could be operated on straightaway,’ Cloudraker said by way of explanation. He led Prime between the circuit slabs. ‘The seriously injured have been sealed in stasis. I know what you’re thinking, but they were happy to shut down.’ He pointed to Prowl’s quarantine pod, which was wedged between standard stasis models on the fifth row. ‘Perhaps this is why you came?’

‘Dear god...’ Prime reached up to touch the glass. One of Prowl’s eyes had puckered into a rust-dot that sucked fluid into his head. ‘I knew Prowl was injured, but I didn’t realise it was... What happened to him?’

‘He contracted a metallurgic contagion. Red Alert and Perceptor managed to slow it down before it reached his brain.’

‘Slow it down? You mean it’s still active?’

‘Very much so. I’m afraid to transfer him to cold stasis in case the few moments “outside” accelerates the virus. The only cure lies in finding a compatible donor. Unfortunately, the last Autobot with a synchronous Vorcode died fighting Pitchshifter in 2010.’

‘Decepticons?’

‘Fulcrum thinks that both Shockwave and Megatron would have made compatible donors. Shockwave’s dead, by the way. And Megatron – well, Megatron’s a different person now.’

Optimus turned away. He couldn’t bear to see Prowl like this.

Nightbeat walked in and nodded a greeting. ‘I’ve never seen this place so full,’ he said, then noticed the look in Prime’s eyes. ‘I’m sorry about Prowl. I know the medics are doing all they can.’

‘It’s not fair, Nightbeat. He didn’t deserve this.’



‘Who does?’ Nightbeat led Optimus into a quiet corner. ‘Listen Prime, we need to talk. Perceptor’s worried that the wormhole is vulnerable to Quintesson misuse, and he wants me to take a team out there to keep guard. Are you okay with that?’

‘Of course, but I’d rather you wait for Wheeljack and the others to get back from the Rust Sea. I don’t like the idea of splitting our forces, not when we’ve so recently come together. Besides, there’s someone you should take with you, someone who—’

He stopped talking: the stasis pod to his right had started shaking. A grey, heavy-knuckled hand squeezed through a fresh split and hung limply between their heads.

‘Cloudraker!’ called Nightbeat. ‘Get over here, quickly!’

Cloudraker abandoned his patient and helped pull the pod from the stack. ‘This is Hot Rod’s pod,’ he said, setting it on the floor. ‘But that’s not Hot Rod inside: that’s Rodimus Prime!’

‘I think that was your fault, Optimus,’ said Nightbeat. ‘Rodimus was part of the Primal Genealogy. The Quintessons stole the Matrix from him.’

‘Hot Rod was my successor? *Hot Rod?*’

‘I know. He became Rodimus Prime once he accepted the Matrix. Without it, he reverted to his old self. His body must have reacted with the Matrix inside you.’

With some difficulty, Optimus unpacked Rodimus Prime’s body and placed his hands on the robot’s chest and forehead. ‘I need some time alone. Please, give me a few moments.’

The three MARBs skated over the Terbium Plains, their drivers – Wheeljack, Mainframe and Siren – racing the evening’s lengthening shadows and blinking grit from their optics.

Wheeljack saw the Crossways manufacturing plant and remembered finding Sygnet in the upstairs room. The memory saddened him in a way he couldn’t explain. He bent his MARB into the wind, flicked on low-beam headlights and thought about his ‘friend’. Sygnet was no doubt hunched in Delphi’s lab trying to unlock the mysteries of the Inhib Chip, slapping his palm against his forehead whenever wrong-footed by a false lead. He hadn’t changed that much in four million years; he was still a hard worker and a skilled engineer, and that made his defection all the harder to accept.

The MARB vibrated under Wheeljack’s boots as he squeezed another fifty mph from the overworked engines. The western hem of the Rust Sea was over the next hill.

A thick spotlight cut across his flight path and he swung right, evading a sudden burst of laserfire. Six Quintesson hoverbikes were racing towards him. He sounded the alarm – a panicked inter-Autobot wake-up call – and banked left, fresh gunfire snapping at his heels. Another day, another Quintesson skirmish: what was it with him and hoverbikes?

He drove his MARB across the Rust Sea, chopping the liquid into foaming brown ripples. Siren and Mainframe followed suit, mastering their vehicles within seconds of hitting the water.

The Quintessons had no qualms about white-water biking and launched themselves onto the Rust Sea.

‘Head for cover!’ screamed Wheeljack, heading for Metroplex.

Up close, the giant Autobot was little more than a string of cliffs and bays. They came across a huge war-wound and ducked inside without a second thought. The Quintessons followed. The MARBs stampeded through twisting corridors, kicking up waves and bouncing headlights off wet walls.

Wheeljack raced down another stretch. Behind him, two hoverbikes used the walls as springboards to overtake each other. He took another corner and gunned for an open vacuum lift, activating the MARB’s base-thrusters the moment he crossed the threshold. Outmanoeuvred, the Quintessons hit the back of the shaft and exploded while Wheeljack reconnected with an upper corridor and, dragging flames, flew through a tear in Metroplex’s hide.

Siren, meanwhile, had already managed to find his way out of the water-world (by luck more than design), and was once more being chased around Metroplex’s coastline. He made a dash for dry land, sensing a Quintesson on his tail. A stray shot clipped his thrusters and flicked him head-over-heels.

At that point, his pursuer simply exploded. Siren shielded his eyes, ploughed through the vaporous debris and 180’d the MARB. He looked up at Mainframe, who was standing on top of Metroplex with a rifle in his hand. ‘Thanks,’ he mouthed.

At that moment another hoverbike burst through the side of Metroplex and skimmed across the water, lasers smoking. Mainframe traced the foaming kickback, steadied his crosshairs, and fired. The hoverbike exploded and rolled across the sea.

*Rolled across the sea?*

Siren blinked and scanned a second time, but got the same result: the hoverbike was skidding, not sinking. It came to a halt still balanced on the surface and relaxed. Intrigued, he flew over to investigate.

'Floating metal?' he said to Wheeljack, who had slowed down alongside him.

'Only one way to solve this,' Siren decided, and jumped into the sea. It went up to his knees. 'There's something underwater,' he said, prodding around with his hands. 'Something pretty big.'

'Don't move,' said Wheeljack, unclipping his weapon. 'Something's happening down there.'

A head popped into view. 'So much for a safe hiding place,' said Ultra Magnus.

Earth.

It was up there somewhere, its ancient light hurtling through the cosmos, imprinting a salty white spec on the ether. Six billion lives boiled down to a infinitesimal visual blip, a distant pinprick that could be sieved through image filaments and reconstructed inside an ocular receptor.

On top of the Sonic Canyons, Centurion lay on his back and pretended he was back home. It was easy to reformat the alien constellations into an Earthly pattern. He imagined a warm breeze playing across his face and superimposed clouds – smoky, top-heavy cumuli – against the heavens.

Sygnnet climbed onto the ledge. 'Hey, what are you doing out here?'

'I could ask you the same question.'

'I needed a break from staring at the Inhibitor Chip. I was about to go blind.' He sat down alongside Centurion. 'It's highly dangerous, you realise, sitting outside an Autobot outpost in plain view. The Quintessons could attack at any moment. Neither of us should be here.'

'I needed some air, so to speak. I don't know anyone down there.'

'Hey, I don't feel that welcome either. The other 'Cons know that I joined you guys before they did. It took me long enough to gain their trust in the first place. Can you believe it? Four million years of loyal service and after two days with the good guys I'm the outsider again.'

'Well, that's what you get for siding with Decepticons.'

'Before Soundwave and the others arrived, I almost felt, I don't know... comfortable. Working with Wheels and having other Autobots around... it felt like old times.'

'Why don't you defect back to the Autobots?'

'A double-traitor, eh? What a popular mechanoid I'd be.'

'And there was me trying to be sympathetic.'

'Look, I've been with the Decepticons too long to simply switch sides. And being a Decepticon is not as bad as it appears to the naïve new recruit. We're not all bloodthirsty maniacs.'

'That's what I don't understand, Sygnnet. Do you actually subscribe to Galvatron's ideology?'

'Galvatron? I don't know. Megatron... Megatron had something, at least in the early days.'

'But all the *killing*. Wheeljack says that billions died in the opening assaults.'

'Yes, although I was on the receiving end in those days. In fact for a good six months I trained for Strikeforce Alpha with your beloved heroes: Bluestreak, Fusion, Pulsar, Thunderbolt, Tempest, Nautilus. Didn't get picked, though.'

'So you upped and left.'

'It's not quite that simple. The Council of Elders still had control of the military, but all they did was sit in the Great Dome and talk. Megatron rallied against the Elders' inaction and vowed to solve the fuel crisis. Peace through tyranny, he said, and we believed him.'

'And Galvatron?'

'An inexact copy. Imagine the worst aspects of Megatron amplified a thousand-fold: the megalomania, the ruthlessness... I shouldn't be talking like this. If you breathe a word of what I've said to anyone I will kill you, okay? I mean it.'

'It's simple, Sygnnet. If we win – *when* we win – you stay behind.'

'If I betrayed Galvatron he'd have me hunted down and killed. He's looking for an excuse as it is. So drop the career advice, okay? Having said that, if you ever get tired of being a do-gooder, the Decepticons

offer some great benefits: an ever-changing leadership, incredible back-stabbing opportunities and a guaranteed climate of fear.' He wasn't making an impression so dropped the joke. 'What's up with you?'

'I'm just wondering what I'm doing here.'

'You're asking the wrong robot.'

'I shouldn't be lying next to some metal canyon, light years from Earth, dividing time between fighting and running.'

'What did you expect when you signed up?'

'I expected to spend my days patrolling Autobot City. Where else could I go? At least in the City I was useful, what with my knowledge of the planet.' He tapped his Autobot insignia. 'When they gave me this I didn't bargain on being whisked halfway across the galaxy and pitted against an alien race. When this is all over I'm going back home.'

'You shouldn't say stuff like that. People who say stuff like that always end up dead.'

Centurion wasn't listening. 'Can you hear that?' he asked.

'What?'

'That noise – from inside Delphi. Someone's screaming.'

The protactinium quarantine hatch – molten-moulded, built to resist energon flashfires, rampaging patients and microbiotic fugitives – was snapped clean off its hinges by Nightbeat, who shouldered his way into the medi-bay 2.4 seconds after hearing Optimus scream.

Prime was lying on the floor, shaking his head. In the background, Rodimus Prime twitched like a fish on sand, waving his hands with papal frailty. Nightbeat crashed to his knees and groped Optimus' shoulders, talking to him until the light returned to his eyes.

'I'm alright, Nightbeat. I'm alright. I'm fine.'

Soundwave and Galvatron ran into the chamber. 'We heard a scream,' said the latter (who, having expected some sort of battle, was disappointed to find a circle of chattering Autobots).

'This is incredible,' said Cloudraker, slotting energon cables into Rodimus' torso as if it were a car battery. 'I'm actually detecting a faint energy signature.' The surgeon looked up, suddenly realising the implications of his rushed diagnostic. 'He's alive! You've brought him back to life!'

'He wasn't actually dead,' said Optimus, climbing to his feet. 'He appeared dead to the naked eye, and his life-signs had, I assume, dropped below detectable levels.'

But Cloudraker wasn't prepared to let this miracle undermine a lifetime of medical study: he wanted details. 'How'd you do it?' he demanded. 'How'd you know he could be saved?'

'As Matrix Bearers, Rodimus and I share a subconscious link. I felt a shift in the sparkline the moment I saw him.' He looked at Nightbeat. 'This is one area where Past and Future have no meaning: outside the Primal Program, time is just a persistent illusion. Even though Rodimus had lost the Matrix, a residual essence remained. By attuning it with my own I could re-ignite his life-glow. It was simply a little more painful than I imagined.'

'But Rodimus was comatose while he held the Matrix. Why couldn't he save himself?'

'A dying man cannot always administer his own treatment. Rodimus needed a helping hand. I carried the Matrix for millions of years; consciously or not, I've become familiar with its intricacies.'

Galvatron turned to leave, bored by the mysticism, and fell against the doorframe, He stifled a gasp of pain and then fell to his knees, his left leg twisting itself into unnatural shapes.

'I will see to him,' said Soundwave, ushering Galvatron into the corridor. Safe from prying eyes, the Communications Officer released his grip and jogged a few steps ahead. 'This may hurt,' he said, then put finger against forehead and concentrated.

Galvatron watched, stunned, his legs reformat themselves into mid-mode protrusions. As a scream was about to break his lips, Soundwave relented. 'I can fix you,' he declared, and ran off.

Clogged with slush and rust, the Trident's green wing tip broke the surface like a periscope. A short distance away, connected by taut steel cables, a dozen Autobots stood in low-tide flotsam and tried to pull the ship onto shore. Above their heads, Mindwipe, Skullcruncher and Triggerhappy balanced on tethered MARBs, aimed for the headland, and sparked maximum thrust.

The Trident nudged forward, fat and reluctant, while Siren stood on the sidelines and shouted encouragement. Death's Head sat on top of a beachhead and squeezed liquid rust from his sopping cloak.

Wheeljack clipped his wrist communicator into place and turned to Ultra Magnus. 'Mainframe says the coast is clear, but it won't be long before more Quintessons arrive. You think the Ark is safe out there?'

'If you'd asked me that two hours ago I'd have said yes.' Ultra Magnus looked out across the sea as if to reassure himself that the spacecruiser was well hidden. 'It's the best I can do, Wheeljack. It won't fit inside Delphi, and I'm not about to park it slap bang in the Canyons.'

'What about your injured troops?' Wheeljack looked at the ragtag crowd making their way along the shoreline. 'Surely there are more of you than this?'

'A few more. Some of our best went down early: Grimlock, Springer, Ebony, Blaster. They're all in stasis.'

A cheer went up as the Trident was dragged ashore. Rustwater gushed from its thrusters. Design-lines and engine crevices became rock-pools under the stars.

'They're restless,' observed Ultra Magnus. 'So much as happened while we've been stuck in hyperspace.'

'Tell me about it. You're not going to believe who's come back from the – well, just wait until you get to Delphi.'

Jolupn and Ryknia tossed another Reddie over the balcony. It twirled like a sycamore leaf and landed on the pile of corpses far below. Each body had a cluster of soft indentations on the back of their neck, as if they'd been coshed with a tenderiser.

'We have an plague on our hands,' said Ryknia gravely. 'Soon we'll be presiding over an empty prison.'

Jolup shrugged. 'Ah, what does it matter? If we need labourers we'll use the Sharkticons.'

'Labourers? What do we need labourers for? I don't intend to waste my time building monuments to Xenon's supposed genius.'

Jolup reactivated the cell bars and tested the electrical charge with a swipe of his beloved shok baton. 'What about Quantax? As long as Xenon's on Aquaria we're at his beck and call.'

'It doesn't have to be like that. What we talked about earlier...'

'Was just that: talk. I'm not convinced that the three of us can wrest control as easily as you say. Besides, is it worth it? How long before Xenon swans in with the next generation?'

'What if Xenon never makes it to New Quintyxia?'

'You think we should throw a spanner in the works?' Jolup leant against the railings. 'Sevax would never agree to it. He's a Monarchist.'

'He can be persuaded. And if not...'

'And if not?' Sevax peered up from the lower level. 'It's not safe to hatch plans out in the open: you never know who might be listening.' He climbed to their level. 'I've processed the results of your bodyscans. Shall I broadcast them to this row of prisoners, or do you want to wait until we're somewhere private?'

Moments later, Ryknia and Jolup were squinting at two crisp, hyper-detailed scans. 'As you know, I originally took these scans so that I could do some cross-checking at Darkmount,' said Sevax. 'But when I looked at the results...' He waved his laser pointer at the screen. 'This is my body, this is Jolup's. They're identical. Literally every joint and sub-component is the same, right down to the last nervecircuit.' He jabbed the keyboard and a new scan appeared on screen. 'And this is you, Ryknia. Spot the difference.'

'Don't play games. I'm the same as you two.'

'That's what I thought, at first. But have a closer look.' Sevax zoomed in on the upper left thigh, where a bright white square shone like a filling in x-rayed teeth.

'What is it?' asked Ryknia.

'I don't know, but it's unique to you.'

Ryknia checked the top of his leg for a scar or an entry wound. 'Is it a tracking device? A lifetracer? Turn the light on and get me a blade. Whatever it is, I'm taking it out.' He looked at the screen scan and his own dark blue alloy, accepted the scalpel, checked he had the right area, then gingerly cut himself open.

‘It’s probably just a stray wire or something,’ said Sevax, who nevertheless strolled up to witness the extraction. ‘A construction glitch.’

‘Twenty shanix says it’s a bullet,’ chipped in Jolup, taking a ringside seat.

Ryknia set a chunk of subcutaneous circuitry on the table. ‘I’m glad you both find this so amusing.’

‘Here, let me.’ Sevax knelt down and began cleaving alloy, using the bodyscan as reference. ‘Got it!’ He balanced the object on his fingertip and took a closer look.

‘My god, Ryknia. It’s an Inhibitor Chip.’

Sygnnet rubbed his optics – a redundant gesture, but psychologically it helped to wipe residual image data. He decided that, in many ways, staring at an Inhibitor Chip was like staring at the sun. Just as Alpha Centauri’s scalding orange light floated across filament reservoirs long after retinal covers were dropped, microscopic circuit prints clung to his eyes when he looked away from an IC.

He’d spent one day staring at a VDU, looking for a clue, a key to unlock the secrets of Quintesson technology, and he had nothing to show for it. The ‘breath of fresh air’, as Centurion put it, had not helped. Wheeljack would return to Delphi expecting results, and he hated to disappoint.

He stretched and returned to work, administering timid electrical shocks to the Inhibitor Chip and monitoring the results on an f-wave monitor. A sensor line jumped and settled in the background. He made notes, unsure as to where the experiment was heading, and was considering going outside again when Soundwave rushed into the lab.

So sudden was his arrival, and so aggressive was the expression on his face, that Sygnnet raised his arms, expecting a single-shot, Decepticon-style execution. Instead, the Communications Officer demanded to see the Inhibitor Chip and pressed his hands against his head.

The f-wave readings went haywire.

Sygnnet stared, open mouthed, looking between Soundwave and the Inhibitor Chip. ‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m reading your mind.’

Q-311 stopped, inspected his boot, and kicked the Tenderiser again, despite his logic centre patiently reminding him, in three thousand strains of program code, that doing so was pointless and short sighted. The mobile recycling unit coughed up another skin-pricking cloud of engine smog, and Q-311 ran through his cache of profanities.

Before he had started thumping Tenderisers, Q-311 had been whipping his squad into a frenzy of enthusiasm. They had spent four days trekking through the so-called Dark Territories and seen everything that pre-occupation Cybertron had to offer: cityscapes webbed with expressways, tube-tunnels, artificial gravity wells, the lot. Their path had been riddled with transients – mainly junkies, mechdazers and slaggers – all of whom had been dutifully fed into the recyc unit. By crossing the Yussian border they had staked new territory and become a Frontier squad.

All of which was fine, except that somewhere between then and now the Tenderiser had necked the last barrel of fuel and ground to a halt on the outskirts of a shantytown. It was not a nice place to break down, being black and sweaty and thick with shadows. A geo-file detailing outdated Cybertronian place names told Q-311 that they were standing in Lonium.

He put his hand on one of the Tenderiser’s caterpillar tracks. He’d have to radio for new fuel, which would no doubt lead to a fresh squad being airdropped in and grabbing all the glory. His only hope lay in Q-8129 returning with something that could restart the vehicle.

The place was getting to him. Every doorway held a figure, moss green and half-seen, ready to break into the open and gun them down. How many of the Cybertronian military were still at large? Quantax said none, but how could you cleanse an entire planet, even one as under-populated as this one, in a week? He felt edgy and cornered, so much so that when Q-8129 ran into the street it was a miracle that the scout wasn’t shot dead for breaking the silence.

Q-311 holstered his shotgun. ‘Where’s the fuel?’

‘No fuel, sir, but I saw something else. Please, follow me.’

‘This place plays tricks on you,’ warned Q-311 as they wandered into the open, more for his benefit than the scout’s. But this was no hallucination: there really was a celestial temple on the horizon, and it really did seem to be exploding in slow motion. Half-dazed, he opened a communications channel and said, ‘This is Frontier Squad 001 requesting immediate pick up.’

The Trident landed on the canyon floor and was pulled into Delphi. It took up all the room in the foyer, the bulbous cockpit reaching the ceiling and the three jutting spikes touching the far wall.

Belly-down on an outside ledge, Centurion adjusted his magnification goggles. ‘Approximately forty MARBs, incoming,’ he whispered. Moments later, the rest of the Ark’s crew were melting through Delphi’s hologramatic veneer two and three at a time: Hound, Blaster, Death’s Head, Mirage, Trailbreaker and the rest.

Optimus stood head and shoulders above most of the crowd. If he was overwhelmed by the influx of familiar and unfamiliar faces, he did not show it. When he spoke, the words flowed calmly, authoritatively:

‘Fastlane, I saw an Autosshuttle in the hangar below which I believe has subspace capabilities. Assemble an engineering team to put the transwarp drive inside the Trident.’ He turned to a new arrival, and the only other Transformer of comparable height. ‘And you must be Ultra Magnus.’

‘How did you guess?’

‘You have to be of a certain stature to carry off a name like that.’

Magnus smiled, and by so doing deviated from the plan he had so meticulously drawn up on the way to Delphi; what had happened to the sober, straightforward introduction he’d imagined, the one topped off with a formal salute? You couldn’t second-guess legends, he thought, and gamely held out his hand. ‘It’s an honour to meet you, Optimus Prime.’

‘Pleasure’s all mine.’ Prime shook Magnus’ hand, still not sure what significance the gesture held. ‘I’m told we met once before.’

‘Yes, sir. Here on Cybertron.’ Magnus had been fishing for something unique about this robot, something that definitely set this Optimus Prime apart from the upgrades and remakes he had fought alongside over the last 20 years. He found it almost straight away: a sharp, fractured light in the eyes that betrayed... well, some would say it betrayed a different soul.

‘I understand that you’re the commander of another planet’s Autobots. I suggest you take your men to Cloudraker and Fulcrum in the medical lab.’

‘All my men – those that still function – have been checked, Optimus. We’ve been fortunate enough,’ he looked over the crowd and beckoned an Autobot over, ‘to have Chief Medical Officer Ratchet on our team.’

Optimus was caught off guard but recovered before anyone noticed. For a moment, he thought Ratchet was going to shake his hand, but the surgeon just folded his arms and looked him over, scrutinising every scratch on his chassis, every battle scar and surgery line. Lower left motor access plate: large scale ambulatory joint replacement after the Stanix raid, 1<sup>st</sup> Cycle 927. Scalpel scratch, right temple: Ibex fuel depot bombing, 1<sup>st</sup> Cycle 988. An overzealous Ark repair program had scrubbed these wounds in 1984, and he hadn’t seen them for four million years.

‘It’s me, Ratchet,’ said Optimus quietly. ‘It’s me.’

25 years earlier Ratchet had failed to resuscitate Optimus after a bomb had torn him apart. Now he wanted to collapse at his friend’s feet and howl apologies until his vocal unit was a crisp black cinder bobbing in his throat; he wanted to explain why he’d stopped operating back in 1987; he wanted to articulate the crushing hopelessness that had raged through his body after laying down the scalpel. But all he could say was ‘I’m sorry’.

‘Sorry? For what?’ Optimus put a hand on his shoulder. ‘I know what happens to me, Ratchet. I don’t know exactly when it happens and I won’t pretend to understand why it happens. The only thing I am sure of is that you did – you will do – everything in your power to save my life.’

‘Very touching, yes?’ said Death’s Head, who was pushing his way through the crowd, his cloak wrapped over his shoulder in a feeble attempt at self-concealment. There were too many people here, and everyone was talking and touching. He’d always worked alone, unencumbered by allies or hangers-on, but ever since nose-diving into Autobot City he’d been squashed, boxed-in and surrounded. In fact it had started before Autobot City: it had started inside an underground vibe-dive in downtown Elpasos, when he

ordered a slug of black meths and sat opposite a holo-pic of Galvatron. Think of the money, he told himself; always think of the money.

'This is, er, Death's Head,' said Ultra Magnus, as if he was introducing an unruly child. 'He infiltrated the Quintessons' Aquarian headquarters.'

'Pleased to meet you.' Optimus offered his hand, eager to display his knowledge of new Cybertronian customs. Death's Head let it hang in mid-air, unfamiliar with the gesture. 'We have a lot to discuss. I assume you'd be willing to return to Aquaria?'

'Absolutely. Plenty of unfinished business, yes?'

'Excellent. Your bravery does the Autobots proud.'

'Let us know when you want to talk strategy,' interrupted Ultra Magnus, quickly turning the bounty hunter aside.

Prime nodded and unclipped his buzzing wrist-com, wondering what Death's Head transformed into. 'Optimus here. What is it?'

Galvatron's voice startled him (a Decepticon on personal Autobot radio? It was a violation). He caught only the tail end of the message: something about a cure. When he walked into the lab a few moments later, he immediately sensed the change in atmosphere.

Soundwave was sitting in a Repair Chair, cables streaming from his chest, a crown of thorny micro-conductors on his head. Somewhere among this messy set-up, a transparent orb fired electricity against the Inhibitor Chip at its core.

Sygnnet tapped the orb. 'Soundwave's found a way to nullify the effects of the Inhibitor Chip.'

'Wheeljack thought the chip was essentially a downsized version of Bombshell's cerebro-shell,' said Perceptor excitedly. 'But I fear he took the comparison too far. The inhibitor is actually a micro-transmitter, the smallest of its kind. It takes anchor in the neural cluster and beams signals that corrupt the CPU.'

'Soundwave deserves all the credit,' said Galvatron, sitting in the corner. 'Whenever he tried to read someone's mind, the Inhibitor Chip inside me went haywire.'

'It appears that his unique ability to interpret electrical impulses puts him in sync with the Inhibitor,' continued Perceptor. 'They share a very similar frequency. Once Soundwave made the connection, figuratively speaking, it was just a matter of fine-tuning. He can now directly counteract the Inhibitor's transmission.'

'This is excellent news,' said Optimus. 'But where does it leave us?'

'Wheeljack and Sygnnet can construct micro-transmitters to jam the Inhibitor, but it will take time. And it means putting a microchip inside every Transformer.'

'Is there no way that Soundwave could broadcast this unique frequency across a wider area?'

With great effort, Soundwave raised his head. 'My ability... is relatively short range. But if I was connected... to a powerful enough transmitter... then yes... I could reach the Manganese Mountains.'

Ryknia confronted his reflection in the dirty blue plexiglass pane and rolled between short- and long-range optical scan. One moment he would see himself, the next he would see the Manganese Mountain range curving into the distance. In the background, a few levels down, he could hear Reddies landing on an ever-growing mound of corpses. The untreated wound in his leg shimmered with loose, sparking circuitry. He was not yet familiar enough with his inherited body to initiate internal repairs.

The extracted Inhibitor Chip rattled inside the test tube he was tapping against the windowsill. Even now, he considered grinding it underfoot. Jolup and Sevax agreed that it looked exactly the same as the ten thousand other silver, square, paper-thin microchips boxed up in the entrance hall, and he was not sure why he had chosen to preserve it. Perhaps it was the very identical nature of the Chip that troubled him, and prompted questions about his past – and the origins of his two contemporaries – that he had not thought to ask.

Not for the first time since the hasty operation at the conference table, he reviewed recent history. After four years of incapacity, he'd been transferred to one of three fresh Decepticon bodysells retrieved from Aquarian orbit. Had Xenon used the Decepticons' bodies as fresh meat on which to test the Inhibitor Chip? Unlikely: the chip had not been completed until *after* the invasion.

He watched a convict ship float over the mountaintops.

Nothing made sense. Why would Xenon pick an unconscious Decepticon as a test subject? Why inject just one, and why in the leg and not the back of the neck? For someone who hated questions, who resented doubt in any form, these vagaries were excruciating.

He'd relished his Decepticon body and the new lease of life it offered him, but at what cost had he been resurrected? What else had Xenon done to the vulnerable, brainless Decepticons before the transplant? What other tics and tricks did these new forms conceal? Had Xenon downloaded an electronic virus into their CPUs, to be activated the moment their mission was accomplished? Were they tagged and remote-controlled, their every move and thought relayed to the Imperial Majestrix? He suddenly felt as helpless as the prisoners downstairs.

When these thoughts had first entered his head, he'd felt the urge to attack everyone and everything around him: Sevax for discovering the anomaly, Jolup for downplaying the implications, and every dumb red Cybe for simply taking up space. Now he directed his hate at more worthy targets: Quantax and Xenon.

Nevertheless, he wanted to exorcise his aggression, and when the alarms went off he knew they promised an opportunity. He ran to the entrance hall, where a scuffle had broken out. They newly arrived Quintesson prisoners had somehow slipped their electro-chains and instigated a sloppy jailbreak. The chipping squad had tackled the rebellion head-on, disturbing a box of Inhibitor Chips in the process. It was difficult to distinguish between guards and prisoners, but Ryknia didn't care. Without prejudice he severed limbs, tore heads from shoulders and, when necessary, used his arm-mounted pulse gun to cripple fleeing prisoners. Gradually, his numerous targets realised that he was killing both guard and prisoner alike, and the lines of battle were redrawn. The tide turned. He flinched as someone stabbed a syringe gun into his open leg wound. This was getting out of hand.

Jolup stepped onto the upper balcony, balanced his rifle and picked off the Quintessons one by one. Just for fun, he killed them in numerical order: Q-37 first, then Q-111, Q-178, Q302...

Ryknia waited for the last shot to fade and pulled the syringe from his leg. The needle came out reluctantly, black and bent.

'They must have gone for the wound,' said Jolup, dropping to floor level. 'Why did they turn on you?'

'I was a little reckless in battle.' Ryknia dabbed the oil on his thigh. 'Ouch. That syringe went pretty deep.'

'You think it was loaded?'

'Who cares? I'm going to patch myself up. Then I suggest we find Sevax and see if any other lowlife guard wants a fight.'

Throughout his life, from enrolling in medical school to running the Ark's medi-bay, Ratchet had always had a problem with time management.

As a naïve Kranian youth, he would roll into download lectures halfway through; as the head of the International Medical Foundation he would miss board meetings because he was too busy swotting up on invasive nanotechnology (like how to implant an artificial singularity inside someone's cerebral cortex) or CG inoculations (his test subject, Starscream, had popped out to attend a Decepticon recruitment rally and never come back); as a tool-or-die man on Earth he would continue futile surgery rather than move on to the next patient. 'You break it, I'll remake it,' he would say, trundling across the battlefield in his mobile repair bay.

He lived in Medical Time, a rushed and hazy world of flexible deadlines. It was a doctor's prerogative. Life-saving miracles always happened 'at the last minute', patients were always seen to 'in the nick of time', and he always rolled onto the battlefield 'not a moment too soon'. He followed his own internal clock, one that was set a few minutes behind everyone else's.

And so it was now. He bolted through Delphi trying to recall the quickest route to Siren's office. He ducked downstairs, sidestepped a couple of bored Triggercons and – not for the first time – concluded that he was genetically predisposed towards tardiness: the more important the meeting, the later his arrival.

He slowed down outside an innocuous door and waited for his ambulatory systems to adjust: there was no way he was going to barge in and let the others hear his whirring motors.



Siren's office was so tiny he thought he'd walked into a vacuum lift. Siren sat on a desk which had been pushed to one side to free up space. Next to him was Optimus Prime. Galvatron, Death's Head, Ultra Magnus, Perceptor, Soundwave and Mirage lined the walls, pulling themselves into nooks and crannies. Only Nightbeat seemed out of place, and Ratchet wondered why he was there.

Galvatron acknowledged his late entrance with a scowl and gestured for him to close the door. No one was speaking except Prime, who mumbled into a wrist-com as if it were a mobile phone. He rang off with, 'Thanks, Wheeljack,' and turned to the others.

'Good news. The Quintesson spacecraft has been fitted with the Autoshuttle's transwarp engines. It can accommodate four passengers.'

Siren flipped a data-disc between his fingers. 'Pincher and Swerve have bio-engineered half a dozen Pretender shells based on Waverider's outer shell.' He looked around the room. 'Waverider's suit has the most advanced undersea capabilities. It can withstand deep-sea pressure and has built-in phosphene searchlights.'

Ratchet frowned. 'Aren't Pretender shells usually bespoke? You know, designed around the core user?' He remembered being forced, as Megatron's prisoner, to design a set of such shells, and quickly severed the thought: some memories were best left buried.

'These are shells in the purest sense,' replied Siren. 'They can be worn by anyone. Their main function is to keep whoever's inside dry.'

'So who are the lucky four?' asked Mirage.

'Count me in,' said Death's Head. 'I have unfinished business with Xenon. Don't need a suit, though.'

'I think it's wise, Prime,' nodded Ultra Magnus. 'He's the only one who can lead us to the base.'

'Agreed.' Prime turned to his neighbour, who was also the Transformer with the largest circle of personal space. 'For similar reasons I think it best that you lead the team, Galvatron. Ultra Magnus, I realise that you've just returned to Cybertron, but I'd like you to go too. And the fourth passenger will be Siren.'

The Autobot in question snapped the data-disc between his fingers. 'Um, are you sure, Optimus? I thought I might be needed here.'

'I'll look after Delphi.'

Siren brushed the shards onto the floor. 'Of course.'

'So it's settled. Once the four of you are inside the Quintesson base your objectives are simple: retrieve the Matrix, cripple any operations Xenon has underway, sabotage all communications and stem the tide of reinforcements.'

Galvatron flattened a smile that threatened to give him away. Retrieve the Matrix? Cripple operations? Minor concerns. He would break-in and murder Xenon in the most protracted and obscene way possible. 'And what will you be doing in our absence, Optimus? Laying siege to the Quintessons' Polyhexian fortress?'

'As a matter of fact, yes.'

'You think we can tackle the Quintessons head-on?' asked a dubious Mirage. Unlike the more star-struck and unquestioning Autobots (and Decepticons), he had never accepted Optimus Prime's supposed omniscience. He would have felt more comfortable had Prowl been here to underpin the broad rhetoric with hard facts.

'We won't be going in blind. Galvatron, what is Thundercracker's current operational status?'

'He no longer exists. Why?'

'It doesn't matter. What about Frenzy? Is he on-line?' Soundwave nodded. 'Good. Have him meet me in the hangar in two minutes.'

'What do you need Frenzy for?' asked Galvatron.

'If everything goes to plan, I won't.' He stood up, signalling that the meeting was at an end. Attendees filed out of the room. 'Nightbeat, if you could stay behind a moment.'

Siren hovered in the doorway and turned, ready to recite a speech he had been polishing since the data-disc shattered. Looking at Optimus Prime moving his desk back to the centre of the room, and hearing Galvatron bark his name, he realised that the moment was lost, and closed the door behind him.

Optimus perched on the desk and faced Nightbeat. 'Now's the time for you to commandeer a team and fly out to the wormhole. Take Frenzy with you. Contact me if the wormhole becomes too unstable, or begins to contract, and I'll fly out there immediately.'

'I take it, Optimus, that you intend to lead the assault on the fortress?'

'Of course. Why?'

'You're putting yourself in a highly dangerous position. You might get killed and – and I'm worried.'

'Ah, but are you worried about me, or about consequences of my death?'

'Actually, Optimus, I'm worried about you. Some things are more important than theoretical paradoxes... and that's not something you hear said very often.'

'I appreciate your concern, but my mind is made up. Besides, I have devised a number of contingency plans.'

'They're not responding, sir. Shall I try again?'

Quantax looked at Q-89 with a mixture of surprise and annoyance. 'No. They are obviously predisposed. Close transmission.' He sank deeper into his chair. Why weren't Ryknia and the others answering? Had something serious happened? A jailbreak? He pictured swarms of Cybertronians snapping their electro-bars, climbing over each other and scaling walls like Sharkticons. Imagine: Sevax is dragged under the crowd-swell and dismembered, his components distributed over a rippling radius before they even hit the ground. Jolup's head curdles into hot slop as a proton blast sheers his face. And Ryknia... Ryknia, terrified, barricades himself in the control room, sends a distress call to the fortress, collapses to his knees and begs to be saved. *Begs.*

He dismissed the daydream as just that, and settled on the more disturbing possibility: Ryknia had cut loose in a fit of pique and broken contact, freed the contingent of Quintesson prisoners and persuaded them to join his burgeoning squad of anti-Monarchists. Was it time to take precautions? An elite kill squad – say, 20 troops – could put the threesome down without fuss, and it wouldn't be difficult to explain their deaths when Xenon arrived. That is, of course, if Xenon's ship ever made it to Cybertron...

As sole ruler of New Quintyxia, he felt that he was doing an admirable job. The thought of the Imperial Majestrix hovering over his land sparked heat shimmers across his optics. Authority – absolute authority – was addictive, and he had started to think of ways to maintain the status quo. Perhaps a group of kamikaze Cybertronian rebels might somehow access anti-aircraft guns and blast Thermopylae out of the sky? Perhaps a freak blast from a plasma energy chamber might atomise Xenon's mothership before it touched down?

He put his plans to one side as Q-311 entered the room. 'You're supposed to be mapping the Dark Territories, 311. I hope you have a compelling reason for disobeying direct orders.'

Q-311 held out a small data slug. 'There's something out there, sir. Something odd. May I?' He activated the main screen and stepped aside. 'I apologise for the lack of sound and the poor picture quality. I downloaded this surveillance footage via long-range optical-audio interface but I cannot explain why—'

'Shut up, 311. Do you realise what you've found? A living, breathing chrono-euclidian.'

'I'm sorry, sir?'

'A wormhole.'

The deep-sea Pretender shell had gave Siren extra height, and Nightbeat had to crane his neck to look into his friend's visor.

'What are you smiling at?' asked Siren.

Nightbeat shook his head. 'It's the new look, that's all. I'm not used to you as a Pretender.'

'You should see what Wheeljack's done to Magnus: he had to remove the poor guy's shoulder towers to make the suit fit properly.'

'You don't want to go on this mission, do you?'

Siren checked that Optimus Prime, Galvatron and the others were still milling around the refuelled Trident before answering. 'I haven't left Cybertron in eight years, Nightbeat. I'm attached to this place.'

'And the real reason is?'

'Excuse me?'

'Come on, Siren. Eight years is just a drop in the ocean for you and me. We spent three centuries underneath the Manganese Mountains – you even regretted not travelling to Nebulos with the Steelhaven crew! So don't tell me that you're prematurely homesick, because I know you too well.'

Siren raised his hands in mock surrender. 'I am at your mercy, Nightbeat. My soul is laid bare.' He removed his helmet. 'I don't know what to say. I mean, you're right – I don't mind travelling to Aquaria, not even if it means bunking up with Galvatron and the bounty hunter. I guess I'm just conscious that we're not coming back.'

'What makes you say that?'

'You're the detective; you work it out. We're using the Trident to access the underwater base, yeah? So how the hell are we going to get to the surface again?'

'Siren!' It was the third time Galvatron had bellowed, and he could no longer be ignored.

Siren backed away, into the hangar. 'That's why I don't want to go, Nightbeat: I don't want to die.'

'Don't talk like that.' Nightbeat gave chase, ignoring the well wishers, mostly Autobots, who were slapping Siren on the shoulder and jostling him on. 'You'll find a way to get back here, or I'll—' His words were trampled by the belligerent crowd as Siren climbed into the cockpit, but he remained talking until Fastlane and his runaway team ring-fenced the onlookers and pushed them to the sidelines.

'Everyone initiate audio dampeners,' ordered Fastlane, and the message was Chinese whispered down the line. The hangar doors opened, sickly blue superheat ringed the Trident's thrusters and, with an almighty crack of sound, the Quintesson ship took off. The echo reverberated through the Canyons, pushing audio receptors to fadeout levels.

Optimus caught Nightbeat watching the hangar doors close. 'They'll be back, you know. All of them.'

'Let's get this over with,' said Nightbeat. He opened a comms-channel and ordered Hound, Bluestreak, Centurion and Frenzy to board the Autosshuttle. 'And this is the part where we say goodbye, Optimus. I expect to see you within 24 hours, preferably in one piece, victorious, and guiding the Alliance towards post-occupation peace.'

'That's a tall order, Nightbeat.'

'You're right. I guess I'll just settle for just seeing you in one piece.'

Ultra Magnus was not happy with the cockpit arrangement.

It wasn't so much the four-seat layout, which was all that could be expected given the size of a standard Trident, but the fact that he was stuck in the back row, relegated to passenger status. Galvatron was piloting, having somehow mastered the sinuous alien navipads and semi-organic geodiscs.

The ship's only Decepticon was pushing the Trident onwards and upwards, barrelling towards orbit as if Cybertron were about to explode. The ascent put pressure on the transwarp drive, which was sending heavy tremors through the ship's superstructure. The walls quivered like a weak and airless lung. Magnus rubbed a grimy porthole on the windscreen's nicotine sheen and realised that his instincts had deceived him. They weren't travelling vertically: they were travelling horizontally. 'What the hell are you playing at, Galvatron? Why aren't we heading for orbit?'

'A slight but essential detour,' said Galvatron, ducking to avoid Ultra Magnus's clumsy hand. 'Touch me and I'll crash this thing, Magnus. I mean it.'

Death's Head pulled Ultra Magnus back into his seat. 'Let's not do anything rash, eh?'

'Where are we going?' demanded Siren. 'Polyhex?'

'Polyhex? Are you mad, Autobot? We'd be slaughtered.'

'Galvatron, I order you to change course!' Ultra Magnus clenched his fists. 'Set us down immediately.'

'Shut up and be patient. We're almost there.'

The gnarled Vosian cityscape rose up to catch the falling Trident. Landslides, graffiti and chopped-up dark blue ruins sat and shimmered in the sun. Galvatron touched down, disembarked, and ran into the ashan jungle.

'Coward!' called Siren (but not too loudly). He looked at the others. 'What now?'

'We need him, yes?'

'Although my every instinct suggests I do otherwise,' said Ultra Magnus, 'I'm going to bring him back. You two stay put.'

Magnus found Galvatron near a rundown fuel depot on the fringe of the Proton Crater, a thermonuclear bite mark so big it deserved to be a proper noun. Barely twelve years old, it was visible from space; in fact, it was practically visible from the other side of the planet.

‘Get out of here, Magnus,’ said Galvatron without looking around. ‘I don’t need a chaperone.’

‘I’ve learnt never to let you out of my sight if I can help it. What are you up to?’

The Decepticon fumbled among the rubble and pulled open a hatchway. ‘I’ve no intention of bailing out, if that’s what you’re worried about. I remembered a little something I’d kept aside for a special occasion.’ He dropped below ground and Magnus followed.

The subterranean membrane was glass-plated, the panels buffed to a giddy gleam. Galvatron kept a few steps ahead and deactivated hidden defences one by one.

Ultra Magnus accessed the historical files that he’d downloaded after his Flamebirth in 1986. The original proton bomb, the one that had sparked the Great War, had flattened the underground utility ducts in the area, and the ‘stabilising’ bomb that Megatron had used to return Cybertron to its original orbit in 2000 had worsened the damage. The Decepticons had obviously rebuilt this area, but for what purpose? There were no rooms, no connecting corridors, just a passageway with glitter ball walls.

‘How long is this going to take, Galvatron? We should have broken orbit by now. Optimus Prime may have already launched his attack, and he’s relying on us to stem the flow of reinforcements.’

‘If it really is Prime, he won’t be relying on anyone but himself. Anyway, we’re here.’ Galvatron opened a trapdoor on the floor, found a keypad and punched in a 600-digit code. Hundreds of layers pulled back until a pinprick of light signalled the end of the tunnel. Galvatron jumped in and Ultra Magnus once more found himself playing catch-up.

At the end of the shaft was a room made entirely of glass: ancient plexi so dense and multi-layered that the walls seemed to flinch and tremble. At the centre of the room was an orb seemingly held in place by a shaft of light.

‘Relax,’ said Galvatron. ‘It’s not what you think. If I had a Decepticon Matrix, do you really think I’d seal it underground?’ He turned away and said to himself, ‘No, I’d use it to kill every last one of you Autobots.’

‘We didn’t come all this way for you to stare at a museum piece. Take what you came for and let’s go.’

Galvatron grabbed the orb and thrust it close to Magnus’ face. There was something inside: a small creature trapped inside a stasis field. ‘You may not have seen one of these before,’ said Galvatron, realising why his companion had not recoiled. ‘It’s a Scraplet: a global cyanide pill that I hoped I would never have to use.’

Ultra Magnus calmly accessed the relevant data-file and tilted his head to get a better look at the tiny red creature. Coiled at an embryonic tilt, it looked feeble and innocuous, when in actual fact it was a self-replicating robo-carnivore responsible for the collapse of entire cybersystems. ‘Where did you get it?’ he said, aghast.

‘After the Great Plague Trannis arranged for a single Scraplet to be frozen in stasis for research purposes. He wanted to know how they reproduced instantaneously. All but one of our scientists refused to take part in the experiments, arguing that the material was too hazardous. It seemed that they’d rather be killed by Trannis than suffer death-by-digestion. The Scraplet was eventually sealed down here.’ He strung the gleaming orb around his neck. ‘It doesn’t like glass.’

‘You’re bringing that thing on board?!’

‘Would you rather I leave it here, ripe for Quintesson discovery? They’re threading their way through the planet, Magnus, not just across it. Soon, every sub-level and duct network will be cleansed – from the Primal Chamber to Subterranea. This weapon isn’t falling into their hands. If some Sharkticon gear-head breaks the seal Cybertron will be dead within weeks.’

‘But that’s what you plan to do, isn’t it? Break the seal, I mean.’

‘Oh god yes. But only when the time is right.’

The last gunshot rang hot and hollow on C deck, a feeble coda to the crescendo of violence that had swept through Kledji. The place smelt different now; the smoky tang of plasma and crisp metal mingled with the syrupy bite of warm lube-juice, threads of which were all over the walls.

‘That’s the last one,’ said Jolup matter-of-factly. He dropped the guard’s body, wiped his hands on his chest and wandered over to Sevax and Ryknia, who were surveying the fruits of their frenzied labour. The last guard topped a pile of cadavers that seemed to contain more Quintessons than Cybertronians.

‘What a mess,’ said Ryknia.

Jolup caught the ambivalence in his voice. ‘Hey, it was fun while it lasted.’

‘Fun?’ snapped Sevax. ‘What was fun? Our stewardship of this place, the rank and power we enjoyed, or the mindless slaughter of 50 of our own troops?’

Jolup snorted. ‘What’s 50 in a force of thousands? Perhaps this will make Quantax realise that we’re not be trifled with, that we’re not just going to sit around backstage while he hogs the spotlight. Right, Ryknia?’

‘Right. He’s washed his hands of us, Sevax. He’ll isolate us and then, when Xenon arrives, have us removed from the picture. Think of this as a pre-emptive strike.’

Somewhere above their heads, another Transformer dropped dead in his cell.

Sevax shook his head. ‘How did it come to this?’

‘This isn’t how it ends,’ said Ryknia adamantly. ‘This is just the beginning.’ The others followed him into the control room, where Cybertron’s sun threw late-day light against the viewing window.

‘Quantax doesn’t know about our little spring clean,’ continued Ryknia. ‘I say we press our advantage and overthrow him.’

‘What, and run the planet?’ Jolup laughed. ‘Sure, why not?’

‘I’m serious. Three against one. The troops will follow whoever’s left standing. I’m not spending the next 60 million years babysitting brain-haggard Cybes or kow-towing to a fading Imperial Majestrix. We are the future: Quintesson minds in Cybertronian bodies! Quinticons!’

‘What about this place?’ asked Sevax.

Ryknia spun on his comrade. Whatever the future held, he thought, Sevax wasn’t part of it. There was no room in the new hierarchy for prevaricators. ‘We abandon this pit! Now!’

‘Right away?’ Jolup thought of work-in-progress Downstairs. ‘I’m, er, not prepared.’

Ryknia picked up a chair and hurled it through the window. A high wind swept into the room.

‘It begins now! Quantax dies tonight, and by daybreak we take our place at the vanguard of the new order.’ He dived through the serrated frame, transformed, and flew towards the setting sun.

In marked contrast to the earlier summit, the clamour in Delphi’s conference chamber was frenzied, almost orgiastic. Alliances had been blurred once more; old boundaries were being crossed and remapped by Autobots and Decepticons too canny and adaptive to let anything undermine their impending counterattack. The multiple generations of mechanoids filling the chamber had become a global tribe, Cybertronians, their name and nature dictated by their homeworld, a planet now at risk.

Optimus Prime did not know how to react to the crowd in front of him. Such comradeship and co-operation was necessary if they were to survive the coming battle, and yet it chilled his fuel to see Autobots mix so freely, so casually, with murderers and tyrants, with people whose self-centred ideologies ran against all 31 Articles of the Autobot Code.

But then how different were the two armies now, four million years after he had deliberately crashed the Ark? In his day, from the Flying Corps to Strikeforce Alpha, the dividing line was not so much drawn but entrenched into the collective Autobot consciousness: Decepticons killed, Autobots did not; Decepticons attacked, Autobots protected. Why did he feel as if the Autobots of 2012 had survived four million years of continuous conflict by learning to love if not the enemy, then the methods and tricks of combat: ruthlessness, deceit, propaganda: all the things that gave the enemy its hideous strength.

Perhaps it was this symbiotic tug-of-war, this hate/hate symmetry that had bred, over soul-sapping lengths of time, to an unspoken co-dependency.

It sickened him.

As the last of the crowd filtered into the chamber he took to the stage and sent up a silent prayer: forgive. To speak to them, to communicate effectively, he would need to appeal to an aggressive nature he despised.

‘Autobots,’ he began, and held the pause as long as possible before adding, ‘...and Decepticons. The waiting is over.’

Hundreds of faces stared back at him, analysing, scrutinising, worshipping.

‘The Quintessons have something that is not rightfully theirs: our world. You,’ (and he seemed to spit the word into the face of every individual) ‘have wasted this world. You have squandered this world. You have abused it, stripped it bare and hacked it to shreds, but it is still your world. Your home. And it’s time you took it back.’

He gripped the lectern as the crowd cheered. He watched Autobots he knew – friends – cup their mouths and bay with the rest of them. Bloodlust, or some warped patriotism? What was he tapping into? What was he exploiting? He stared back blankly until they settled down.

‘The Quintessons think we are broken and defeated. They shall pay the price for their arrogance.’ He winced at what he was saying, but the crowd loved it.

‘I have despatched the “Aerial-Bots” to recover the Ark. In a few moments it will touch down outside and ferry the ground force to Polyhex. Everyone with airborne modes will follow its lead. In six hours we attack the Quintesson fortress; in seven the tide of battle turns in our favour; in eight we breach their defences. By daybreak we are victorious, and the Quintessons... the Quintessons are...’ It was no use. The crowd were shouting too loudly.

This is what they wanted to hear, he thought. This is what so many of them really thought and felt. He cranked his vocal unit to its maximum setting to give them what they wanted.

‘The Quintessons have greater numbers, firepower and hardware. They will do everything they can to destroy us, and they will fail. Why? Because ultimately – tragically – we are Transformers. We have lived, breathed, wept and bled warfare for four million years. It is obvious, though the very realisation shames me to the core, that when it comes to killing – we have no equal.’

The crowd was on its feet, and the adulation drove him into the shadows.

Autobot and Decepticon were no more, and All truly were One. He wished he could share in their unity, but instead felt a despair that was as bitter and dry as death itself. He now knew, with unbearable certainty, that the civil war would not end until each and every last one of them was dead.

For a fleeting, half-realised moment – so brief as to dodge the borders of his self-perception – he wondered whether it would be best if tonight the Quintessons won.

In considering the Origin of Species, it is quite conceivable that a naturalist, reflecting on the mutual affinities of organic beings, on their embryological relations, their geographical distribution, geological succession, and other such facts, might come to the conclusion that each species had not been independently created, but had descended, like varieties, from other species.

**Charles Darwin**  
*'The Origin of Species'*

'No Cybes'

**Sign outside Maccadam's Old Oil House**  
*1 January 2013*

'The Kalis raid turned up no Neogens. The entire compound was practically empty, but I did discover worrying signs of previous activity. Three underground bunkers contained traces of customised eugenics pods and evidence of *in vitro* Channelling: sentio metallico residue, fresh-frame cast-offs – these morph-births were definitely planned, not some hurried back-street suck 'n' sever hatchet job. In fact, I would go so far as to say that they might have a Lifer or two down here, pumping out protoforms on demand. If, as we suspect, the Neogens have developed some technoganic Vorcode based on the so-called Bastard Births of 2013, we could be looking at nothing less than an artificial Evopeak: a new age of half beast/half robot downsizers.'

**Extract from memo from Great Shot to Star Saber, 2357**

## *EvoPeak*

It was the end of the road.

In fact no, it was more than the end of the road: the road had long ago been abandoned in favour of the ditch, the dugout, the rugged woodland turn-off. Now it was just The End. There was simply nowhere else to go.

1<sup>st</sup> January 2013.

Haxian watched a fracture line snake its way across the corridor and imagined thousands more carving up the underwater base. Some of the outlying passages had already collapsed, unstitched by an ocean floor that was all too eagerly pulling itself apart. So much for precautions: things were beginning to fall apart.

He was far too loyal (and afraid) to take his leader to task over the danger they found themselves in. Nerves getting the better of him, he'd reported the latest planet-quake in a neutral tone and pointed out that they should really start thinking about evacuating the base before, you know, it imploded. Xenon had dragged him here, to the vault.

He'd never been inside the vault before. General Rodern had once said that everyone involved in building the supercomputer inside had been put to death upon completing their mammoth task (except Q-42, who was rumoured to have been trapped inside); he knew that to be a lie. Nevertheless, only Xenon enjoyed access now. The Quintesson protoforms inside were upgraded collectively, via remote surgery – alterations to the central template were carried out by microsurgical repair mechanisms inside the incubation tubes.

Xenon opened the vault door.

'I am showing you the Cargo because I trust you, Haxian, and because it is you who must become Majestrix should I die. As my successor, you deserve to know the full scope of my masterplan.'

'Thank you, sir. I am honoured to be chosen.' It sounded hollow and trite, but what else could he say? He had no wish to lead; he was content to be left alone, hunched over a lamp-lit desk, designing bodysells. He walked into the vault and was scandalised by its size. It was supposed to be a city-sized chamber feeding deep into the planet's crust, but this was nothing more than a walkway. He touched the ceiling and realised his mistake: this wasn't the hybridised osmium putty that was used to build the rest of the base, this was smooth computer casing. This wasn't a simple corridor: this was a borehole into the supercomputer. By touching the ceiling, he was touching God.

Haxian had seen the blueprints for God (Or G.O.D., as it was known originally: Genetics and Ontological Deconstruction), but had never dreamt of standing inside the finished product. The project was so classified that only the Majestrix was trusted with the full range of information, and the Quintesson academia, small though it was, still argued amongst themselves as to the macroprocessor's purpose.

'It's beautiful,' Haxian said, imagining neuro-currents and deep-thought programs coursing through the spiralling, fine-wired circuitry.

'Three years to build, Haxian, twenty million to design. God was built with only purpose in mind: decode the Prime Program. In a few moments the assimilation will be over, and the Matrix will at last be broken down into the primal algorithm, into the Lifecode itself. A perfect equation that can breathe sentience into dead metal.'



'I am impressed, my Lord,' (and it was the understatement of the decade) 'but if you wanted to give life to the Cargo, why not simply use the Matrix itself?'

'The Matrix can only be opened by a select few: those Seedlings with a genetic quirk that warps their Vorcode. This is the only way.'

'Hm. Again, I don't mean to doubt your genius, but will it work? I mean, a machine capable of taking a life-giving property and extrapolating the very nature of being? The complexity of it all defies comprehension.'

'That's what the Masters said before they made the breakthrough.'

'I don't understand.'

'You wouldn't, Haxian, you're far too young. But you've memorised the Old Texts and served under Kledji, so you know that we've been carrying on the Progenitors' work. I will use the Lifecode as it was originally intended: to grant life. Ever since Unicron captured the Progenitors, we've been a warrior race. Neoseeds like you were created to hunt and destroy. I swear that the war with the Cybertronians will be our last. I want to bring peace to New Quintyxia.'

'That's another thing I don't understand. Why do we call it *New Quintyxia* when—'

'Because it represents a new beginning! A new breed of Quintesson will populate the planet. Think of it, Haxian – the start of a eugenics program so far-reaching it will signal a new Galactic Renaissance.'

Before Xenon could elaborate, a modest access panel on the supercomputer's casing slid open and ejected the Matrix as if it were a freshly copied CD. Although there were no puncture wounds or contact scars, he somehow knew the information had been plundered. He tossed the Matrix to Haxian. 'It's yours,' he said. 'Think of it as a reward for all your hard work.'

Haxian strapped it around his neck like a piece of costume jewellery. 'What happens now, my Lord?'

Xenon spread his tentacles over the interface port. 'Now,' he said, 'we put God to the test.'

The supercomputer responded to his mental commands with preternatural speed, second-guessing his every nuance. The corridor disintegrated, revealing a distant horizon and field upon field of birthing tubes. Ten thousand 'lifegivers' – transference needles attached to vials of stim-fluid – were lowered into place above the tubes, which became as supple as gel. On Xenon's command, the needles burrowed into every Seedling's forehead.

'Stand back, Haxian. This has never been attempted, not even by the Masters themselves.'

'Good luck, my Lord.' (And in Haxian's mind he was thinking, 'Just get *on* with it – plug yourself in, impregnate the Seedlings, disconnect and get me the hell off this tatty little planet.')

'Okay,' said Xenon to no one in particular. 'Hit me.'

Direct interface with God was not nice; it was not pleasant. It pulled Xenon in unsettling directions, and it made him want to scream or weep – preferably both, simultaneously. Mentally, he held still, trying to locate a nagging impulse that tugged at his subconscious – some dark reflex that told him to dash his head against the floor until his cerebrocircuitry slipped between the cracks; but he persevered. With a single thought he downloaded the Lifecode and, in doing so, became one with God.

Except it's never that simple, is it?

In merging with the Almighty (technological or otherwise), Xenon found himself teetering over an abyss of pure abstraction. He was tempted to surrender himself totally. Suddenly, nothing was impossible; the answers to questions he could not conceive charged through the trembling circuits of his brain. All at once he was the Absolute, the Endpoint.

When he reluctantly severed connections (and by god, even turning away from the raging force of the Allspark was like dying a thousand deaths), he spoke with the same voice as before. 'The Seedlings are being programmed with the Lifecode as we speak. I will know when the process is complete. Transfer the rest of the troops to Thermopylae. We're leaving.'

'That's just it, Centurion: we don't know what we're heading towards.'

Nightbeat walked across the Autosshuttle's cabin burning off nervous energy. Not a way for a team leader to behave, he realised, but keeping up appearances was way down on his list of priorities.

'You see, the wormhole isn't behaving properly,' he continued. 'Perceptor thinks it's entered the final stage of gestation, the evolutionary peak that precedes total closedown.'

‘And you’ve no idea what that entails?’ Centurion could not believe they were racing towards a cosmological hot spot they knew nothing about.

‘We’re relying on guesswork. The wormhole can go one of two ways. It might expand—’

‘Good or bad?’ asked Hound.

‘The eye of the wormhole would envelop entire cities and transport them across the time-stream. Eventually, all of Cybertron would be teleported backwards or forwards in time, depending on the whim of the Primal consciousness – we could materialise inside the Hub, or the Sentient Core, or a void of pure, post-purge abstraction.’

‘Bad, then. And the other possibility?’

‘The wormhole simply collapses.’ Nightbeat shook his head at Hound’s optimistic grin. ‘Except if it does that any time soon, Optimus Prime is stranded here, out of time.’

‘But surely that’s good news for the Autobots of 2012?’

‘Yes, but it’s bad news for the Autobots of 1984, the ones lying deactivated on a volcanic floor. Of which you were one, Hound.’

‘Ah.’

‘From now on, the subject is officially off-limits. Whatever the state of the wormhole, if we can get close, we do: we need to protect it. If the Quintessons cross the threshold, god knows what will happen.’ Nightbeat leant over Red Alert in the pilot seat and peered through the viewscreen. All that could be seen below were quill-thin motorways circling Yuss like stretch marks.

‘Is a direct aerial approach wise?’ asked Red Alert. ‘The Quintessons have surveillance globes everywhere.’

‘I don’t care. We’ve taken the quickest route from Delphi to Yuss without any interference, and if the Quintessons get in the way now, so be it.’

He was tired of taking precautions, tired of wringing his hands while the Quintessons had free run of the planet. From this moment forth they would tackle the enemy head-on: direct action, brutal and decisive. Prime had the Fortress; Galvatron had Aquaria. One way or another, this is how it ended.

‘Uh-oh,’ said Red Alert, studying the scan-screen. ‘Uh-oh,’ he said again, a little louder, so that the rest of the crew took notice. ‘The instruments are playing up. Readings are off the scale.’

‘Can they be trusted?’ demanded Nightbeat.

‘Well if they were accurate, we’d be flying at twice the speed of light. So no. Something’s wreaking havoc with our gyro systems.’

Frenzy pointed ahead. ‘Something like that, perhaps?’

Up ahead, the celestial temple gleamed with a nuclear sheen. Lightning danced across a plateau so fractured that it had become little more than a patchwork of tight-knit obelisks.

The shuttle rolled to a halt outside the temple. The air was fissured with pockets of rogue temperature, and when the Autobots disembarked they were caught off guard by the nonsense climate. A spasm of energy rippled through their bodies, through their shuttle, through the Acid Wastes, and across the entire planet—

*In Tene, a secret commune of Neutrals dropped dead from circuit poisoning; in Subterranea, a Lifer trapped in the throes of morphbirth screamed as the embryo started to grow inwards; somewhere inside Delphi, Springer came back to life thinking of the next circuit-booster; in Eocra, a city street was transported 289 years into the future, where it materialised in front of a dying robot signing a treaty; and for 0.8 microseconds the planet reversed its orbital course.*

Nightbeat wasn’t to know any of this background stuff. He just bent his head against the wind and walked into the temple. To his horror and relief, the Ark of 1984 was still visible through the portal’s throbbing frame. If the Quintessons had discovered the wormhole, they obviously hadn’t used it: the destination point was exactly as before. How could he have left it unguarded?

Lightning skewered the temple horizontally, roping the opposite walls together with terrifying force. The stained plexiglass windows erupted over the pews, a support column toppled like timber and a clump of desiccated bodies fell from the ceiling. Nightbeat brushed glass from his shoulders and looked at the worshippers. Was this the end they had foretold? Was this J’nuwan?

Having mastered his aerial mode a little quicker than his comrades, Jolup moved into pole position and landed on the runway on top of the Quintesson fortress.

‘Why hasn’t Quantax opened fire?’ he demanded, as if cheated of an early skirmish.

‘What were you expecting?’ Ryknia snapped. ‘A whirlwind of crossfire? Quantax doesn’t even know why we’re here.’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure,’ muttered Sevox, the last to transform and land. The fortress wall bowed gently out of sight, flanked by a distant landscape of lights and lengthening shadows. The three of them were used to the mountainside; the metropolis, though toppled and deserted, gave them pause. The recycling plant stood out as the only other intact structure in the province; it reclined on the horizon, draped in sodium. A few dozen miles opposite, Darkmount burned in the dirt.

‘Sure beats the hell out of our old planet,’ said Jolup, shielding his face from the wind.

‘Which one?’ said Ryknia, heading inside.

Quantax peeled himself away from the main screen as the three Quintecons marched into the control room. ‘You’re a long way from home, Ryknia,’ he said, and looked at Jolup and Sevox. ‘He drag you two along for the ride?’

‘What’s that?’ demanded Jolup, nodding to the monitor screen.

‘Frontier film. Ever heard of chrono-euclidae?’

‘They’re described in the Old Texts,’ said Sevox. ‘Temporal passageways, distillations of space/time.’

‘Wormholes. We’ve found one in sector fourteen. But you three didn’t come here to discuss camcorder footage, did you?’

Ryknia rubbed a speck of dirt from the palm of his hand. ‘No, Quantax, we didn’t. We came here to discuss our position in your hierarchy.’ He lifted his arm-mounted laser rifles with a casualness that bordered on resignation. ‘Or should that be *your* position in *our* hierarchy? It’s time for a change.’

‘I see.’ Quantax raised his hands. ‘So. What happens now?’

‘Now we kill you,’ spat Jolup. ‘Nothing fancy, just a few dozen plasma blasts through your face.’

‘Very well. Do it.’

The Quintecons looked at each other, shrugged, and re-aligned their weapons. Could it really be this easy?

‘Afraid to kill me, Ryknia? You always were a gutless bastard.’

Ryknia’s eyes flashed, he clenched his fist, and – nothing. No shot rang out, no kickback nudged his arm. He could *imagine* the plasma bolt scorching from the barrel, but that was all. A unique pain singed the back of his eyeballs and massaged his brain with nausea so intense, so crippling, that it threatened to drive him off-line.

Quantax laughed.

Ryknia looked to his teammates for an answer, but they too were trying to shake off the whine of sensory overload. Reflected in their desperate faces he saw his own fear and helplessness – what was happening to them?

‘My weapon’s faulty!’ grunted Jolup – as if an external malfunction accounted for the meltdown inside – and promptly launched a volley of laserfire into the floor. Quantax kept laughing.

‘What’s so *funny*?’ demanded Ryknia. He dragged a target beam onto Quantax’s forehead but his will to fire was overridden in a frenzy of conflicting motives. He simply could not bring himself to shoot at his commanding officer.

‘Excuse me, but would anyone object if I turned the tables?’ said Quantax.

The control room shimmered and dispersed in a damp grey drizzle of holo-fragments, revealing row upon row of heavily-armed guards. Solid backgrounds reasserted themselves through the fade-out and Ryknia realised the room was a good three times bigger than he had thought. Holo-walls: how obvious, he thought. How demeaning.

Quantax paced the inner rim of bodyguards, enjoying the revised scenario. ‘The thing I find most staggering,’ he said, vocalising mid-thought, ‘is that three jumped-up night watchmen like yourselves genuinely thought they could swan in here, into the heart of my own fortress, and kill me. So ungrateful. I like to think I deserved more.’

He stepped in front of Sevox. ‘What about you? Anything to say? Some insight or prophecy that describes your imminent death? No, I didn’t think so.’

‘If you’re going to shoot us,’ said Jolup, trying to sound impassive, ‘then shoot us. Don’t talk us to death.’

‘Wait!’ Ryknia raised his hands. ‘Why are you talking about gratitude? Why do you “deserve” something from us, Quantax? What could we possibly owe you?’

‘Everything. Your lives. Your bodies.’

‘What do you know about our bodies?’ asked Sevax, suddenly interested.

‘General Quantax! I think you should see this.’

‘Not now, 281!’ Quantax dragged his finger down Jolup’s cheekbone. ‘For four years you three existed as balls of cerebral circuitry – low-maintenance brain modules bobbing in liquid, chained to life support. How we laughed – Xenon, Rodern and me – as the foot soldiers wheeled you about the Royal Court, locked away in your pristine little fishbowls. Did you never stop to think why you were left as you were when Xenon had thousands of bodyshells in the vault?’

‘What are you saying?’ demanded Ryknia. ‘That Xenon didn’t want us revived?’

‘On the contrary. Xenon often talked of giving you new bodies; he even commissioned prototypes. Each time I managed to convince him that you weren’t yet ready. I said you were still too traumatised. Eventually, my persistence paid off: he lost interest, and devoted his full energies to the Cargo.’

‘And yet here we are,’ said Jolup, ‘in these Decepticon forms.’

‘Ultimately, I was the one who encouraged the transplant. I even requested that you be posted under my command. I felt I could use some lackeys – powerful but slavishly loyal.’

‘Loyal? Is that why we burst in here and put guns to your head?’

‘No, Jolup, but it’s why you couldn’t pull the trigger. While the three of you were on life-support I had Ferrax – how can I phrase this? – *modify* you a little. Under my guidance he made some minor cerebral adjustments.’

‘You lobotomised us!’ Ryknia lunged forward and was restrained by guards. They need not have bothered: the onrush of sickness would have stalled him anyway. ‘You tampered with our brains!’

‘From your perspective, it was just a temporary, painless glitch in the life-pod systems – a few moments off-line. From mine, it was ten cycles of microsurgery and a whole new aspect to your personalities: the inability to cause me harm.’

Q-281 pushed through the crowd. ‘With respect, sir, I’m afraid that this cannot wait.’

‘It *can* wait, 281,’ Quantax said, waving a gun at him. ‘It can wait.’ He turned back to his prisoners. ‘I see that none of you doubt my words. You all experienced the side effects when trying to shoot me.’

‘What else did you do to us?’ asked Ryknia.

‘Nothing. In some small way, I trusted you. I gave you an opportunity to exercise free will and pledge your services to me willingly. Don’t worry. A few sparks of a laser scalpel and you’ll be my willing slaves for... well, forever.’

‘General Quantax, I must insist that—’

An energy bolt dissolved Q-281’s head and shoulders. Quantax waved the smoke from the barrel of his handgun and saw a movement inside 281’s chest cavity. On looking closer, he realised it was his mistake: a fat blip on the scanner scope was reflected in the wound to give the illusion of movement. No, not one blip: a hundred.

Quantax did a double take. *A hundred blips on the scanner scope?* ‘Something’s heading this way!’ he yelled. ‘On screen, now!’

Brushing the edge of the picture (gold and battered and pounding towards the fortress) was the Ark, surrounded by the massed aerial ranks of the Cybertronian Alliance. He didn’t know which Transformers had appeared on horizon, or how they’d survived the meticulous Antiholocaust, or why they’d chosen this moment, this sharpened, hyper-real moment, to launch an attack; but none of that mattered.

‘I want every Tenderiser, am-tank, sky-swatter, ACG and rail-gun outside *now!*’ he screamed, prowling the command room, clawing at the air. ‘Every squadron, every recon unit, every frontier team, every ranger battalion: return and regroup! Surround the fortress! All Tridents – take to the air!’ He pressed a comm-chip to his audio-receptor, ready for the onrush of progress reports, and looked at Ryknia, Sevax and Jolup, still ringed by guards.

‘Well, what are you waiting for? Get outside! Meet the enemy head on!’

Galvatron fumbled with the Trident's control web and – much to the surprise of his fellow passengers – managed to find the right combination of touch-keys and hand-pads. The ship choked on its light-drive and lurched back into reg-space, materialising just outside Aquarian orbit. Up ahead was the third and final Quintesson mothership, Thermopylae.

'It's heading straight towards us!' said Siren.

'Correction,' said Death's Head. 'We are heading towards it.'

'Will you two shut up in the back seat!' snapped Galvatron. He threw the Trident into a violent evasive manoeuvre, dipped between two towers, hugged a stretch of engine tubing and nearly clipped a radar cluster as he cleared the far side.

Ultra Magnus pulled his hands from the trenches he had made on the arms of his seat. 'Nice. Very nice. So much for slipping by undetected.' He peered through the viewscreen. 'I take it that's Aquaria down there, Death's Head? It looks like it's going to explode.'

'Perhaps we should turn back.'

'No way, Siren. The Matrix is down there.'

'Xenon's down there,' said Galvatron.

Ten billion shanix is down there, thought Death's Head, but decided to keep quiet.

The Trident pierced the atmosphere and dived into the maelstrom. Venomous clouds heaped themselves high, acid rain hit hard and the ocean foamed itself into a frenzy. Galvatron flung the Trident into a nosedive and cracked the raging sea-green surface with suicidal force.

'An Autobot shuttle would have been crushed in seconds,' said Ultra Magnus gravely, feeling the need to make conversation as the Trident dived deeper. An entire world of pressure was bearing down on him; it reminded him of being dragged underneath churning lava back in 1987, his senses stripped to touch and taste alone.

With Death's Head consulting his tracking database, the Trident soon found the abyss. It had become wider in his absence, and probably deeper too, but it was definitely the right one.

The searchlights began to flicker and fade.

Optimus Prime stood behind Bluestreak, the Ark's new pilot, and stared through the spacecraft's viewscreen. Dense protective forcefields were wrapped the ship like clingfilm; they gave the outside world a turquoise tint. Although the Quintesson Fortress did not yet register on the horizon, he saw that the first Tridents had already taken to the air.

He'd led larger armies into battle (hell, Strikeforce Beta alone had been made up of three thousand Autobots), but this one was different. He'd never seen the current breed in battle, but the thought stirred feelings of awe and disgust in shifting measures. The majority of Transformers clogging the deck had honed their dark art. In the early days – and he cursed himself for referring to them as such – even the Decepticons were inexperienced when it came to fighting; by 2012 everyone regarded it as second nature. No, it *was* their nature: the fighting had become contextual, and life and death found expression purely through the act of war.

He closed his eyes and raised the communicator to his mouth. 'The Quintessons have rallied their troops,' he said, wearily, 'and the Tridents are heading this way.' The message was broadcast to every member of the aerial strike force, who, having detected the counter-attack the moment it materialised, was holding back until the lead order. 'Autobots, Decepticons: take them *down*.'

A thousand metres above the long-deserted border settlement of Lerrius, above a knot of expressways and coolant towers, Quintesson and Cybertronian forces overlapped, and night became day.

Autobots and Decepticons fired high-wire clusterbombs into the onslaught of Tridents and banked hard to avoid the rush of surface flame. Debris flew like popcorn. By the time the first explosion had peaked, the division between Trident and Cyberjet was non-existent: the two sides had become one. The battle raced high and wide with the force and spread of a blister-bomb. Soon, Polyhexian aerospace was scabbed with a crust of flared air and afterglow as one scribbled burnout trail bled into the next.

Sevax, Ryknia and Jolup split up the moment they left the Fortress. Their Decepticon bodies felt like second nature now, and they fought with a rage and tenacity beyond the grasp of most Quintesson pilots. These ingrained skills, plus superior speed, firepower and endurance, made them a dangerous enough enemy, but their biggest advantage was their outward appearance. The Cybertronians saw them as allies,

brothers not quite recognised in the heat of battle. Quintesson pilots were familiar with their odd-looking commandants, and tried not to snag them by mistake.

Ryknia skirted the edges of battle and picked off anyone who got too close; Jolup delved gleefully into the mayhem; and Sevax – poor, frightened Sevax – began sidling towards orbit.

The Ark moved slowly through the heart of the battle, shrugging off Trident fire. Bluestreak kept her low, forcing the Quintessons to nosedive in attack, and after a few minutes of ground-hugging the Fortress was suddenly within strafing range.

‘Keep her steady,’ Optimus said. ‘We won’t be here much longer.’ He opened another comms-link. ‘Mirage? We’ve rung their doorbell. Time for you to move in.’

On a loading bay scuffed with fume and ancient traction, the Transformers watched the hangar doors open and waited for Mirage’s signal. Once the forcefields had disintegrated, they launched themselves into freefall. Some were vapourised by Quintesson fire as they fell, others sustained so many clips and grazes that they crash-landed as limbless torsos.

Those that hit the ground conscious found themselves surrounded by hover-bikes and Sharkticons: it was going to be messy fight. Sure enough, the air soon became clogged with buckshot and splattered lubricant. Dead bodies rode explosion curves like ragdolls and puppets.

Mirage scooped Bonecrusher off the floor, brought his disrupter rifle down hard across the back of a Quintesson’s head, and blasted a pathway towards the nearest pack of Cybertronian survivors.

Tracks burst from a bulging knot of Sharkticons, stripped to the chassis by teeth-tear and overbite. Vibrating with shock, hands barely able to lift his black beam gun, he sank to his knees and was crushed by a toppling am-tank.

Swindle kicked the disembowelled remains of Headstrong aside and turned his scatter-blaster to the dash and scramble all around him. He thought he heard Crosshairs screaming for help but lost sight of him as Dozer rolled by, tackling three Quints simultaneously.

Hosehead and Throwback bagged a sky-swatter platform and started raking Tridents out of the air; Smokescreen, Trailbreaker and Carcass grabbed hover-bikes and attacked a back-up squad; Clawback transformed to puma mode and tore his way through a ring of trigger-happy Sharkticons.

And so on, and so forth.

Bluestreak had not taken his eyes from the viewscreen since crossing into Polyhex: his life for the last half hour had been the pulse and flex of the forcefields and the scratchy sky in front. ‘Well?’ he said. ‘Are we winning?’

‘Impossible to say,’ said Optimus, the only other person aboard the Ark. ‘But in a few moments I’ll have some front-line reports.’ He strapped another concussion blaster over his back and took steps towards the door. ‘You know the drill, Bluestreak. As soon as the Fortress is in range...’ He took the vacuum lift to d-deck, waited for the outer shields to flicker, and threw himself into battle.

Only the members of the Quintesson Royal Court had the ability to identify particular Cybertronians, and even then, as Xenon had learnt to his cost, there was still room for error. The average Quintesson trooper saw all Transformers as the same, both in allegiance and appearance; to a lowly Sharkticon, the Cybertronians were practically a race of clones.

None of the Quintessons, therefore, paid much attention to the broad-shouldered red and blue Autobot that came thudding onto the battlefield – at least not until he started swatting hover-bikes with his bare hands and sniping runaways from two thousand feet; until he threw Sharkticons into the overhead crossfire, transformed into an articulated tank-truck and butted rail-guns off their platforms. By then it was too late. Autobots and Decepticons followed his example and fought with a renewed vigour.

Bluestreak, meanwhile, felt horribly alone. The Ark seemed far bigger and far more vulnerable than it had been moments earlier, when a living legend was breathing down his neck. Tridents were nibbling at the shields and soon the energy build-up would cause shutdown.

And then, suddenly, it happened: he was in range. The Fortress was clearly visible up ahead. He primed the laser cannons, flexed his trigger-finger, sent up a prayer to Primus, locked-on and fired. The upper west wing of the Fortress disappeared in a fireball ringed with matchstick-black shielding. When the smoke cleared, the Fortress only had four intact sides, and the Ark was making a vertical getaway.

Back at Delphi, Sygnet bounced away from the comms-port as if he had been electrocuted. 'That's the signal!' he cried, half-expecting the communications lab to collapse around his feet. 'They've hit the Fortress!'

Chromedome accidentally crushed a connection lead between his fingertips. 'Will you *please* calm down?' He was leaning over the control desk, weighed down by a helmet of such taut and polished blackness that it sucked the very light from the room. Mouth-mics copied the curve of his chin and figures slid across his dark visor. 'I'm running a little behind schedule, okay?'

'Tell that to Prime in...'

Sygnet consulted his chronometer, 'two point six hours.' But he took Chromedome's advice and left the room, careful not to antagonise him further.

Alone in the corridor, he flexed his servos to relieve the tension. Some warped and malnourished part of him, a character aspect he thought had been buried with his Autobot badge, longed to be with Optimus Prime and the others, whipping Quints and Sharkies on the front line.

It never used to be like this. In the past – that four million year gap between Arklaunch and Contact – he had been content to lock himself in his lab. It paid not to get involved with the outside world, particularly during the reigns of Straxus and Trannis – that hellish eternity of ethnic cleansing. It started with Trannis' virulent apartheid and the simple badge-tag system (yellow for Neutral, green for Empty); it ended with phosphex blitzes (how to strip a robot to the core without leaving anything but a smear of whitened ash), engex injections (with air bubbles big enough to boil your brain), microwave chambers, mulch-pits and body-dumps. He was good with his hands and quick with his brain, so had somehow avoided 'crop-dusting' duties, where one would wander through wastelands syringing bullets of pure energon from the brains of the cleansed. And what was the end result? When the global campaign was over, when Straxus had washed his hands and retreated to his throne room, he announced that Decepticon scientists had confirmed that there were six thousand ways to kill a Cybertronian.

If there really was a god, and if He was as benevolent as the Pentateuch described, then He had long ago turned his back on the whole sorry mess and vowed never to intervene. Some races are beyond redemption.

So, over the years, Sygnet had learned to hold the war at arm's length, like a ticking bomb anxious to explode. He'd done this not so much because he was a coward, more because he valued the more cerebral elements of warfare. At least that's what he'd told himself. Why wade through the Sludge Swamps filtering Autoscent when you could be devising biotoxins and techno-weaponry, AI-guns and sub-light drives? Not to use on civilians – Primus no, he'd never gone in for all that sado-stuff, all that gang-slash and group-torture – but to use on the Autobots. The fighting itself – grubby, hand-to-hand knockabout stuff – had never interested him, and if it hadn't been for Ratbat's tacit threats he'd have registered with the Empire and joined the Cyberforming Exodus under Jhiaxus and the others. It was a missed opportunity he had regretted, with depressing regularity, for the last few million years.

He followed a knot of cables that ran down the side of the corridor like a line of gunpowder. Standing by the keg, two levels down, were Perceptor, Wheeljack and Soundwave. Sygnet had seen his senior officer in various states of disrepair, but never as vulnerable as this. Stripped to operational minimum (head, torso, couple of limbs), his endoskeletal circuitry glistened like frosted sugar, his plate-less scalp bristled with needles, and conduit cables plugged every interface socket. He had become a living transmitter.

The most disconcerting thing, however, was not his frailty, or the ring of portable energon packs fencing him off, but his passivity; the way he lay there, head to one side, staring blankly as Wheeljack and Perceptor stuck more pins into his body.

'We've had the signal from Bluestreak,' Sygnet said, still looking at Soundwave. 'How is he?'

'Conscious,' said Soundwave, 'And tired of being talked about in the third person.'

'You are now fully connected to Delphi's transmitter,' explained Perceptor. 'Reaching the Manganese Mountains will not pose a problem. As soon as you transmit the jamming signal, every prisoner should break the Inhibitor program. Is Chromedome ready? Anyone?'

'I'll just call him.' Sygnet pressed a finger to his audio receptor and nodded. 'He's ready. He says that once Soundwave has transmitted the blocking signal he'll piggy-back a secondary message giving the prisoners co-ordinates and instructions.' Sygnet paused. 'He also wishes us luck.'

‘There’s no room for luck in science,’ snapped Perceptor, wiping oil from his brow. ‘Let’s get this over with. I’m activating Delphi’s transmitter now, Soundwave. I am afraid that this might hurt.’

Soundwave’s teeth chattered as untamed energy coursed through his neuranet. He transmitted the jamming frequency with a single thought; and at the same time, every single light in Southern Cybertron switched itself off.

And suddenly Shrapnel heard voices...

Sound – well, that in itself was a novelty. Rich and layered, ranging in pitch and volume, it exploded against receptors that were suddenly and inexplicably revitalised. He continued listening, building a vocabulary of sounds, too afraid to raise his optic shields (Did he have eyes? And if so, was there anything to see?).

The sounds carried their own associative memory. He recalled the jackboot snap of gunshots, the vacuum rush of a full-frag explosion, the clip and tear of a laser hitting home. Electrobars, fine red spray, needles in the neck... His body screamed as a billion sensor nodes gorged on fresh stimuli. It was good pain, though: honest and immediate.

He could hear voices outside. People were talking about the Quintessons, about escape, about the colour of their skin. They talked about a place named Delphi and the need to get there as soon as possible. He transformed into insect mode, slipped out of his chains, attached his antennae to the nearest electro-bars and swooned at the rush of power. The volts raged through his miniaturised body, spreading to solar cells and energy membranes; with a single thought, he reversed the flow and overloaded Kledji’s generator. Gossamer-thin threads of energy spread through the complex, hopping from cell to cell, leaping across bars and balconies, shutting everything down.

By the time Shrapnel disengaged, the prisoners were breaking free and transforming into hover-cars and pulse-planes and a hundred other modes. One thought burned in their minds as they ran through the spray-chambers and into the open air; one thought forced them across the runway and into the fully fuelled transport ships. The thought that was so compelling, so persuasive, that no one questioned it; right now, all that mattered was reaching a little-known Autobase in the Sonic Canyons.

Wherever he looked it was the same, like some garish version of Unicron’s Pit.

Sheets of flame; rusting cadavers heaped into centipedal body-sculptures; hip-high trenches wet with fuel pools and mouth oil; a sky full of neon strata.

Quantax knew that watching the battle from the balcony was madness: one stray shot from below could kill him. He didn’t care. Out here he could survey his kingdom and the mighty army he commanded. They were fighting to protect *him*. They were dying in order that he may live. How could he cower in a bunker in the face of such beautiful sacrifice?

A signal inside his head told him that the last of the Frontier Squads had arrived and added their weight to his ground force. Such perfect timing, such peerless tactical flair. The am-tanks had toppled, the rail-guns had overheated and the recyc units were now nothing more than burning beacons, but it didn’t matter. The troops themselves were risking their lives to defend him. That was enough.

He filtered rad-smoke and petrofumes through his olfactory sensors, grabbed a laser rifle and hoisted it to eye level. His crosshairs prowled the battlefield, passing over the writhing bodies, seeking out an easy target.

There. Found it.

It was one of a thousand gunshots; just another hard red thread of energy skimming across the battlefield. Optimus was looking elsewhere at the time. He didn’t see the distant flash of light; he didn’t see the laserbeam hit home. To him, Mainframe’s head simply... popped.

Optimus screamed at the sight of a suddenly headless Autobot take a backward step, clench his fists and topple, plank-like, onto the turf.

In that one stilled moment, that contraction of time and motion, the battle was transformed. Mainframe, quietly-spoken computer hacker from suburban Mytharc (the first Transformer to launch a sub-



space message; the last Transformer to be cured of Nucleoparalysis) could have been any one of a hundred Autobots. But he represented a shift in the ratio of deaths, a tipping of the scales. Prime shrugged off a leaping Sharkticon and, with Mainframe slumped across his feet, sank ammunition into the advancing crowds. He'd left it too late. Another microsecond might condemn another Autobot, another Decepticon. He sparked a long-range inter-Autobot communication and felt a surge of relief when it was answered. 'Bluestreak, it's time we left. Pinpoint my bioscan and land. I'll do the rest.'

Acting Decepticon commander Onslaught came running at his call, pausing only to knock a Quintesson off his hover-bike and break his neck. 'What is it?' he demanded. 'We're going in for the kill?'

'Quite the opposite: we're retreating. Judging by the Quintesson phalanx I saw on the horizon, Quantax has called in the reinforcements. Relay my order among all your men. We're moving to stage two.'

Five... Six... (Wounding - call it five and a half)... Six

Quantax lowered his rifle in disbelief. The Cybertronians' mothership was lowering itself towards the battlefield and igniting its landing lights. For a moment he pictured the ultimate kamikaze manoeuvre; sixty million tonnes of interstellar hardware dropping like a stone on Quintesson and Cybertronian alike. But no, the spacecraft was slowing down, braving the laserfire from above and below, and a circle of space was forming as mechanoids scattered to avoid touchdown.

The Transformers closest to the Ark took up position around the landing ramp and fired at every Quintesson within range. Silverbolt led his team in strafing runs that pulverised anyone who got too close. Autobots and Decepticons skidded into the Ark or turned to add their firepower to the defence net.

Some Quintessons still got through, though. Bluestreak froze as Sharkticons appeared on the Ark's viewscreen, blocking out light, cracking the plexiglass with tooth and claw. It was the same all over: the beasts were using each other as stepping stones to straddle the roof and tear at the wrapping.

By the time the Ark took off it was virtually hidden under a crust of interlocking Sharkticons. Bluestreak flipped the spacecraft and dislodged them with a smile. The Ark was skimming towards the Polyhex border before they'd had hit the ground.

Quantax stormed into the control room. This wasn't victory. The Cybertronians were still out there, licking their wounds after a cowardly hit and run. He would not let them slip through his fingers; not again. Not after this.

'All units! This battle doesn't end until every Cybertronian is dead! Pursue the enemy spacecraft! All ground squads convene inside the launch bay immediately! If you can walk, if you can pick up a gun, you're coming with me!'

'Well, who's coming with me?'

Ultra Magnus' question went unanswered. The others were too entranced by the dim discs of vanilla light playing over the entrance to the underwater base. At this depth they had expected serenity, a pause for breath amid the piledriving currents, but it wasn't to be. To maintain position, Galvatron had been forced to channel all power into the Trident's guidance jets.

Magnus put his hand on the cockpit's airlock. 'I said, who's coming with me?'

'No need to go swimming,' said Death's Head, swapping his left hand for a spearhead. 'Once saw a Quintesson sub gain entry through the docking portal over there. Say we use the plasma cannons to carve a hole above that intersection, yes?'

'What,' said Siren, 'and flood the base?'

'You don't build a subsea base without taking precautions, right? Reckon we'll have a couple of seconds before the inner shields kick in to stem the fl—'

Galvatron fired. The plasma bolts punched a hole into the docking bay and the Trident was sucked inside, along with thousands of gallons of *aqua fortis*. The viewscreen shattered, and foaming liquid filled the cockpit. Death's Head rode with the flow, surrendered to the will of the waves, and glided through the broken airlock. Unfamiliar with both the severity of the current and their fat, sluggish Pretender shells,

Galvatron and Siren were pinned in their seats and left to pray that the brown liquid did not find a crack or fissure in their armour. They could hear Magnus screaming.

Death's Head fully expected to be shot as soon as he appeared in the dock, but there were no guards. The chamber was empty. The damaged wall had been sealed and now the liquid was draining away. He watched the Trident's wingtips stretch into view as the water level dropped. Soon, his Cybertronian teammates were climbing into a dry dock.

'Where is everyone?' asked Siren. 'You take 'em all out, DH?'

'Recovered the Matrix and liberated your planet too, yes?'

The docking chamber rocked as a thousand geysers of steam erupted from drainage valves. Something had sprung a leak, or overflowed, because no sooner had it slipped away, the backwash and brine was leaking up through the floor.

Galvatron straightened his Scraplet necklace. 'They're running. Everyone's running. You saw the spacecruiser in orbit.'

'We're too late?' said Siren, not sounding too disappointed.

'I refuse to accept that.' Magnus pulled shotguns from his Pretender backpack and shook liquid from the barrels. 'Split into pairs and spread. Death's Head, give Siren the guided tour. Galvatron, you're with me.'

'If you want to tag along, Magnus, that's fine. But I doubt we're looking for the same thing.'

'There's no time to argue, Nightbeat! You've trusted my instincts before, why not—' Optimus paused over the handheld communicator. 'No, there's no other way. He's essential to my plans. Just find him and bring him to the Canyons.' Another pause and then, 'That's an order, Nightbeat. Prime out.'

He replaced the comm-set and checked one of the Ark's radar screens. 'How many Tridents, Bluestreak?'

'Too many. One must be a full-blown landcruiser.'

'In direct pursuit?'

'Yeah. Expect the first wave in under five minutes.'

'Excellent.' Prime stepped down onto the wider bridge and acknowledged Mirage with a nod. 'For a moment I thought they'd ignored the bait. Their fighter craft are fast.'

'The Ark is faster. We should widen the gap.'

'You know the plan.'

'Do I? You keep adding little twists and turns. Why did you intervene back there? You were supposed to stay on the Ark, not dive headlong into battle!'

'You seriously expect me to watch and wait while my men are slaughtered?'

'I expect you to keep sight of the larger picture.'

'You call this the larger picture? In my time Cybertron had a population of billions, not just a ragged handful of sub-groups and hybrids. All I see now is a race reduced to triple numbers, forever teetering on the brink.'

'But it's nearly over! We're going to win!'

'Mirage, my friend, even if we win the next ten thousand battles, there will be ten thousand more. There is no future – just a powering down, a weathering.'

Mirage stared at him, appalled. 'I wish I had the words to make you realise what we've been through. We carried on where you left off! After you died on Earth we considered giving up; by your reckoning, we were just a ragged handful, a few dozen Autobots stranded on a godawful alien planet. You don't have a monopoly of hopelessness, Prime. You take my place in, I dunno, 1989, when Starscream possesses the Underbase.'

'Starscream possessed the Underbase?!'

'Or swap with me in 1993, when we discover a Cybertronian splinter-race of *billions*, an Empire colonising the galaxy in our name.'

Prime's eyes widened in horror.

'No, wait, why not trade places in 2006, when the Antiprimus Himself nearly rips the planet to shreds with his bare hands!'

'You'll forgive me when I say that the last event I recall with any clarity was crashing into a volcano four million years ago.'

'The point is, Optimus, that we've done well to get this far. We've survived and we've managed, and if for one passing nanosecond we thought it wasn't worth it, or that we were fighting for a lost cause, we'd surrender. You know what they say, Prime: where there's life, there's hope. And there's more life in me now, after all this time fighting for it, than there's ever been. So don't talk to me about an eternity of war, because there will be an end. One way or another, it will end. It has to.'

'I wonder if you truly believe what you say.'

Bluestreak craned his head. 'Hey guys, the lead Tridents have just appeared on visual and we're about to take the scenic route through the Canyons. Better hold onto something solid!' And with that, he turned the Ark on its side and dived into the Sonic Canyons.

The Tridents had no qualms about giving chase, and their size gave them the confidence to hug the curves of the rippled metal cliffs. Soon, the canyons were filled with laserfire. Explosions did not climb, twist and fade: they rolled along the ravine, clawing at the walls, desperate for oxygen.

Sealed inside d-deck, the Ark's crew was protected from the thunderous noise outside. To Chromedome, Perceptor, Soundwave, Sygnet, Wheeljack and Ratchet however, all of whom were stuck inside Delphi, it sounded like the end of the world. The canyons' geo-acoustics pumped the sound of the Ark's thrusters to ear-quaking levels and forced them to their knees.

Bluestreak smiled involuntarily as enemy fire decimated the cliff-face on either side of the Ark (the pressure of flying upside down had given him an energon rush that refused to subside; now he knew what Springer meant when he talked about the 'corrosive kick'). The bend straightened out and he found himself back at his starting point. In front of him, the final wave of Tridents were gamely chasing their predecessors.

'I've hogged the limelight long enough,' he said through the Ark's intercom. 'It's time for you air-jocks to do some work.'

Silverbolt and Dirge had already prepared their troops. The launch doors retracted, the sun flooded the loading bay, and for the second time that day the air corps took to the skies. The Tridents saw what was happening, realised they were running in circles, and abandoned the canyons, only too happy to hunt Cybes in a wide-open space.

Optimus turned to the few remaining Autobots and Decepticons. 'Now it's our turn,' he said. 'Bluestreak will set us down outside Delphi. I want everyone to activate full audio dampeners: it's going to get a little loud out there.'

The Ark swept low over the canyons. Transformers dropped from its undercarriage and ran towards home.

'Take care, old friend,' said Optimus as the Autobot mothership returned to battle.

*'You too, Prime. See you back at—'*

But Bluestreak never completed his message, and the Ark never completed its ascent. It exploded in a fireball that seemed to eclipse the sun itself, so vibrant and fulsome was the supra-hot core. Direct witnesses were temporarily blinded by the blast, their retinas swimming in colour. Those who caught the fade-out saw a slab of debris crashing to the ground.

Nightbeat could not believe what he had just heard.

He was so surprised, in fact, that he held the communicator to his lips long after Optimus had stopped talking. For a moment he wondered whether the stories were true, whether the Underbase-saturated badlands all around him really did induce the madness they were famous for. How else could he explain the order he had just been given?

No one else noticed the shock on his face, or the way the communicator slipped from his fingers. He tried to focus on the task at hand. Don't answer back, he told himself. Don't try to rationalise. Sometimes, intellect came second to impulse. He would do as he had been told, and to hell with the consequences. He called Frenzy over for a private word.

'This is the wormhole I was describing earlier,' he said, leading the Decepticon through the remains of the celestial temple. 'You're looking at the Ark of 1984. All you have to do is mentally attune yourself to a certain time – it helps to focus on a strong visual memory – and you can cross over.'

'Very impressive,' Frenzy sneered. 'But what does this have to do with me?'

Nightbeat took him by the arm. 'Optimus has given us a little errand...'

'Magnus! Over here!'

'What is it?' Ultra Magnus splashed over to Galvatron, who as usual was a few corridors ahead. 'What have you found?'

'My old cell. And my old cellmates. Look on the floor.'

'Thunderclash! Longtooth!' Magnus fell to his knees. Only parts of the Pretender remained: keepsakes that would barely fill an open hand: scabs of paint, optic glass, a tusk. He was mingled with Thunderclash like a double exposure, a mess of overlap and twin-space.

'Leave them,' said Galvatron, knowing he would be ignored.

'Longtooth's dead, but Thunderclash...' Magnus separated the debris as if dusting for fingerprints. 'What did they do to him?'

'They *killed* him, Magnus! Come on!'

Galvatron ran off, muttering to himself.

Ultra Magnus took off his Pretender helmet to get a better look. Thunderclash's head was split in two like a cleaved apple; one side was balanced on its rounded base, exposing the core. Just off-centre, studded with thousands of neural feeds, was his brain module – a ripe pip, glossy and intact.

'I know you can't hear me,' he said, flexing his fingers in preparation, 'but you're going to be alright.' Thunderclash's body was irretrievable, but his brain could be picked and pocketed. He switched his optics to tight focus and watched his heavy Pretender glove move into view. Just a pinch and snip to detach the central wiring, and it would all be over.

He touched the brain module with his wet hand. It disintegrated between his fingertips.

The wormhole shuddered as it deposited three Transformers into 2013. Frenzy was doubled up with laughter, but stopped when he saw that the cracks in the temple floor had become fully blown ruptures. They'd only be gone a couple of minutes and now the world was falling apart. Were those flames he could see below?

Thundercracker was next, utterly bemused. He held his hands above his head, muttering something about self-destructing. Nightbeat prodded him off the altar with his photon gun. 'Believe me, this will all make perfect sense if you give me a chance to explain. Get the Autoshuttle, Frenzy. Thunders here needs an escort to the Sonic Canyons.'

'Where am I?' asked Thundercracker. One moment he was watching Bumblebee run for his life in 1986, the next he was being coshed over the head as he knelt to inspect a suspicious-looking 'energon crystal'.

'You're in a very bad place,' said Nightbeat, looking at the tendrils of wormhole energy forcing the landscape apart. 'This is the Cybertron of 2013. Don't worry, it's not all like this. Not yet, anyway.'

Nightbeat watched Thundercracker board the Autoshuttle and noted how simple this abduction had been, at least on an emotional level. Where was the *angst* and the existential hubris, the nagging guilt about morality and ethics? Perhaps it was easier with a Decepticon, although he hoped he wasn't as prejudiced as that. Perhaps tampering with time itself wasn't as hazardous as he'd imagined. Perhaps everything was easier second time around.

He wandered back into the temple to look at the new past: once the Ark, now a nondescript patch of earthen rock face circa January 1986. He froze.

It wasn't possible. Not *now*.

The portal had started to shrink.

'No!'

Death's Head ignored Siren's scream and fired, but the advance warning, however unintentional, gave Haxian a chance to hide. The technician crashed behind his workbench as a spear thudded into a spare set of telearmour.

'He's wearing the Matrix!' Siren hissed. 'We can't risk it!'

'Pity we don't share the same concerns, eh?' Death's Head swapped wrist attachments and shredded half the lab with a hail of acid-tipped shards. Haxian ducked behind another workbench. 'You should see what I do with my other hand,' shouted Death's Head, loading another spike-shell. 'Come on. What's the point in hiding? Surrender and I'll let you live.'

'Don't listen to him! He'll shoot you the moment you stand up!'

'Who's side are you on, Siren? Thinking maybe I'll shoot you first.'

'That would invalidate your contract.'

'Should have read the small print, eh?'

'Look, DH, if the Matrix is damaged we've come here for nothing.'

'You're not my sole employer. Before you lot came along I was hired to wipe out whoever I found down here. And the Hybridians could outbid you with their loose change.'

'Fine time to start weighing up your loyalties!'

'Loyalties? No such word. I'd double cross myself if I could make a profit, yes?'

'Why am I not surprised? You really are a sorry piece of— wait!' Siren jabbed his weapon at the workbench. 'Did you hear something? I thought the Quint was out of ammo.'

Death's Head pointed to a handgun lying among the test tubes and broken glass. 'He is.'

Siren gave a nod, and they approached the workbench from opposite angles, ready to drop or dive or open fire. They found Haxian sitting upright with his legs stretched out, his hands hanging limply by his sides.

'Soft-destruct, they call it,' said Siren, crouching to eye level. 'The brain module burns itself out at rather than blowing up. Less painful.'

Death's Head looked puzzled. 'You'd have thought he'd have gone for the big bang, eh? Taken us out with him.'

'Some people, given the option, choose to die with dignity.' Siren laid down his weapon and went to prise the Matrix from the scientist's rigid hands. 'Not everyone wants to go out fight—'

Haxian exploded.

At some point (somewhere between landing outside Delphi and banging a bullet through the fuselage of a distant Trident), Optimus Prime finally surrendered to the mechanics of war. Loose targeting, keeping space, marking attackers, picking the weak and unguarded: everything came flooding back. He was well-versed in the etiquette of war and its lexicon of denial: words like 'countermove', 'damage limitation' and 'pre-emptive strike' could be used to excuse any indiscretion, any atrocity. He was a freedom fighter; his enemy was a terrorist. He interrogated; they tortured.

A few of the more religious Autobots, already maddened by the onset of slow internal fade, had draped themselves at his feet, as if the sole of his boot could heal and temper.

The Quintessons were everywhere. A Trident stitched a thread of plasmafire between fleeing Autobots; Rewind caved in under photon bolts; Getaway's head left his body. He was so overwhelmed by the enemy (the troops, the Tridents, the liquid skim of green-silver/silver-green) and by the Autobots clinging to his heels, that he almost missed the transport ship sliding over the cliff-tops. It settled on the canyon floor and opened its doors, and suddenly they had arrived.

Hundreds of them, all painted red.

'Where the hell have *you* been?'

Magnus knelt with his back to the wall and slotted another energon clip into place. 'Shut up, Galvatron. I'm not in the mood, okay?'

Galvatron didn't think it was an unreasonable question, considering that he'd spent the last few minutes waist-deep in *aqua fortis* trading shots with the Imperial Majestrix outside an enormous vault. Part of him wondered why he was bothering to shield himself when it was unlikely that Xenon's lasers could penetrate his super-dense armour. Deep down he knew that he was being self-indulgent, dragging things out to make all this worthwhile.

Ultra Magnus stared at Galvatron's disquietingly serene expression. 'Did you hear the explosion before?'

‘Which one? This place is coming apart at the seams.’

‘I think Siren and Death’s Head are dead.’

He cocked his head thoughtfully. ‘Nope. Still not caring.’

‘Do you think they found the Matrix?’

‘I’m not crouching here for my health, Magnus. The five-headed freak hiding around the corner is Xenon, the Quintesson overlord. If anyone has your precious bauble, it’s him.’ Galvatron leapt to his feet and ran.

‘What are you doing?!’

‘He’s gone inside the vault!’

They found Xenon standing at the end of the walkway. The vault was filled with thousands upon thousands of bodies, laid out in open pods, glimmering and fully formed, free from biowires and energon feeds. Xenon, the oldest surviving Progenitor, was smiling, each of his five faces was smiling, and Magnus was certain that every robot in every pod was smiling too.

Galvatron ran to the edge of the walkway and stared at the bodies.

He recognised them.

Pladen, Tomaandi, Primon, Sentinel, Cariot, Fastphase, Casaari, Lynchpin, Tempest, Caesura, Miniad, and thousands more.

He recognised them all.

‘In some ways I’m disappointed that you’re here to witness this,’ said Xenon, his tentacles moving as fast as to pallor the air itself. ‘Like the moment of death, the moment of birth should be a private occasion.’

‘You built all these robots,’ said Ultra Magnus, impressed and appalled. ‘Why?’

‘Because we are a finite race with a built-in expiry date – circuitburn – and no means of procreation. We are the exception to the universal rule that says Life Begets Life.’

‘What do you expect from Unicron’s offspring? You were never meant to get this far: you should’ve done the universe a favour and keeled over five years ago, when Rodimus used Primus to trap Unicron inside the Matrix.’

‘How much do you know about us, Autobot? How much do you know about *yourselves*? I ask because you seem to think we’re younger than you are. And because you seem to regard “Primus” and “Unicron” as different things.’

Until now, General Quantax had been certain of one thing: victory in the skies. He’d remained on the outskirts of the Sonic Canyons, safe in his landcruiser, confident that sheer weight of numbers would see the aerial Transformers defeated. He wasn’t prepared for the surge of Cybertronian reinforcements. As always, he saw them first on his radar screen – a rash of pixels that slid across the positioning lines. He switched to the viewscreen, where they registered as a plague of red locusts. Fresh from Kledji to balance the stacked odds, they compensated for their lack of weaponry by drawing fire and clipping wings.

As above, so it was below: the escapees had spread across the battlefield with the speed and stealth of Corrodia Gravis, using their feet and their fists to tenderise the enemy. They pulled weapons from dead hands, tore tails off Sharkticons and blurred into alternate modes.

It wasn’t just their colour that separated them from everyone else, nor was it the branding marks on their foreheads: it was the way they moved and fought and used their hands. So swift, so silent, wearing torture scars and cell shadows. They delivered each killing stroke with a sombre melancholy, as if they were somehow fulfilling a moral obligation.

Galvatron stared at the thousands of perfect bodysHELLS below. ‘You’re pathetic, Xenon,’ he said quietly. ‘You pontificate about a brave new race, about a new breed of Quintesson, but all I see are old robots, millions of years out of date. Is that why you invaded Cybertron? To steal the designs of dead Autobots?’

‘Stealing?’ Xenon looked puzzled for the first time. ‘Do you really not know? Do you really not know what you are? What *we* are?’

‘What have you done with the Matrix?’ asked Ultra Magnus.

'You mean the geode? It has been fully assimilated. The Lifecode colours my thoughts now. It dances between my synapses. I feel it like a heartbeat, a memory. Can you hear it resonate in my voice? Can you see it shine behind my eyes?'

'All I hear is a madman,' said Magnus, 'and all I see are symptoms of your madness. You steal our planet from us, you pollute the Primal wellspring, and yet you speak...' (he shook his head: he truly could not believe this was happening) '...you speak as if we should be grateful?'

'Oh, you should be. We gave you so much and asked for so little in return. You wasted Cybertron and you used the geode – perhaps the most precious object in the universe – to perpetuate your tit-for-tat, schoolyard brawl, your small-minded galactic scuffle. Four million years... for god's sake, you'd have thought it was a trifle dull by now, wouldn't you?' Xenon hovered a little higher and spread his tentacles wide. 'Perhaps I should enlighten you a little before I suck the life from your bodies.'

Galvatron put his hand on Ultra Magnus's arm. 'Hold your fire. I want to hear what he was to say.'

'Contrary to popular belief, we were not forged inside one of Unicron's intestinal tracts. We started off as a quasi-organic race – now known as the Progenitors – with our own planet, Quintyxia. Like other races, we evolved and developed and progressed over time. Unlike other races, we pushed our tech level from two to 12 in a little under six million cycles. We started off drawing circles in the sand and, in the time it takes most civilisations to invent the wheel, we mastered trans-warp technology. With a colonial fervour we laid claim to a planet on the other side of the galaxy and christened it Quiniad. It was a half-breed world in a weak orbit, but we wanted to turn it into paradise. Don't look so shocked! Our scientists had tamed molecules and streamlined antimatter; we felt we could do anything.'

'We became classed as a B Grade race, two steps away from the Evopeak, the point at which civilisations transcend the Base Dimensioned Universe and reach the Sentient Core, a plane of reality populated by nth-beings such as the Fahl and the Vok.'

'We spent millions of years trying to take those last two steps, but we'd reached a technological impasse. We made no further breakthroughs. Discoveries that would guarantee Ascension – anti-time, the black gods, Chaos Point, remote memory and the like – were forever out of reach. Desperate to achieve immortality, we looked elsewhere for inspiration. The only A Grade civilisation that had yet to reach their Evopeak was a race known as the Masters, pseudo-corporeal beings in the White Sector. Our spies discovered that they were developing AI technology so advanced it could breathe life into the lifeless. They called it pre-conceptual reflexive inter-metaphysical unification software.'

Xenon waited for a reaction.

'Do I have to spell it out for you? The Masters called this software P.R.I.M.U.S.'

Magnus took a step back. 'Oh my god.'

'Quite,' said Xenon. 'The Masters tested their software on their most advanced computers: geodes made from holistic crystal called "thought glass". P.R.I.M.U.S. was encoded onto link-facets and split edges, onto the molecular grain itself.'

'Suddenly self-aware, the geodes found they had three choices: go mad, commit suicide or wage war on each other. The waging war option was always the most popular. Some geodes even developed a messiah complex. We didn't care; we wanted one. If we were to reach the Sentient Core, we had to steal a geode programmed with sentient software and extrapolate the Lifecode – the purest expression of P.R.I.M.U.S.'

'We recruited a large team of mercenaries – the Weavers – to raid the White Sector, being sure to take all the necessary precautions: we rewrote their memories and pumped them full of emo-narcotics. We even programmed a Pavlovian failsafe into their nervous systems so that interrogation would trigger suicide.'

'Our diplomats then set about engineering an intergalactic war. Believe me, it takes time. The Weavers waited until entire galaxies were being wiped out and then, when the Masters' attention was diverted, sneaked in the back door – albeit a back door consisting of two hundred looped black holes and quantum-sensitive reg-space.'

Galvatron turned to Ultra Magnus. 'Did that make any sense to you? Because to me it sounded like typical Quintesson myth making. I've never even heard of the White Sector, let alone the Weavers.'

'I don't know,' said Ultra Magnus, shaking his head. 'I'm sure I've heard Red Alert mention the Fahl...'

'I don't care whether you believe me or not,' said Xenon. 'All you need to know is that the Weavers returned with not one but two geodes, each encoded with P.R.I.M.U.S. We knew the Masters had noticed'

the theft – every Weaver was destroyed within a cycle – and set about hiding the evidence. We buried one geode deep inside Quiniad and the other inside Quintyxia. We were prepared to wait ten million years before digging them up.

‘Before we buried them, however, we made a startling discovery. The Masters had protected the software in two ways. Not only was it encrypted, tied up in knots and scramble codes to the power of ten billion, but it contained a latent virus designed to purge the Lifecode if the geode was disturbed.

‘But I digress... The geodes were buried and our scientists began building decoders to extrapolate the Lifecode. They realised that the decoders would need to be the size of cities, of entire continents, but it didn’t matter, because finally the Ascension was within reach.

‘We didn’t realise that the Masters had discovered that we were responsible for the Raid.

‘One day on Quintyxia the sky was filled with a swarm of tiny metallic creatures – the Masters’ legendary nanobot enforcers. They turned cities into sculptures of bone and silica, whole mountain ranges into knuckled spines of steel. Those of us that could boarded the mothership, Colonia, and fled.

‘Once in hyperspace we headed for Quiniad, confident that the Masters would not be able to track us down. But the transwarp jump had been made without the necessary alignments, and we found ourselves fighting against the current. We should have reached Quiniad in weeks; instead, we awoke from stasis two million years later. We exited hyperspace thinking that the whole universe might have changed: before fleeing Quintyxia we’d heard that members of the Sentient Core had banned the Masters from Ascending and destroyed all the research that had led to the creation of P.R.I.M.U.S. There were nasty rumours on the Galactic Rim that the Masters had turned their attention to the Base Dimensioned Universe: if they couldn’t reach Evopeak, they’d bring everyone else to heel.

‘At first it seemed that nothing had changed when we reached Quiniad. The planet was still a barren, windswept lump of rock. We subsequently discovered that during our hyperspatial exile it had played host to its own population-pocket, its own eco-surge: a mini-civilisation of telepaths and psychics had rechristened it Outpost 25. Like I say, we discovered all this much later; there was no trace of them when we arrived. We began to dig for the second geode and, 13 miles down, hit metal: red hot metal. That night the quakes started. We boarded the Colonia, convinced that the planet was unstable, and dived back into hyperspace.’

‘Where are you going with this?’ asked Ultra Magnus. ‘You’re hovering there with ten thousand new troops underneath you, ready to transmit this so-called Lifecode. If anyone should be playing for time, it’s us.’

‘I’m sorry if this bores you,’ spat Xenon, ‘but the tale’s worth telling, if only to see the look on your face.’

‘Continue,’ said Galvatron, ‘from where you left off.’ He had a horrible feeling that he knew where this tale was heading.

‘Where was I? Oh yes, we abandoned Quiniad, went back into stasis, and headed for Quintyxia. We didn’t even know if it existed anymore, but we had nowhere else to go. Some of us thought that it may have been taken over by another race; others predicted that there would be nothing left except a twist of blackened rock. And while Quintyxia had changed, it wasn’t in the way we expected. We’d left behind a lush, verdant world of saltwater oceans, forests and ice floes. We returned to a planet made entirely of metal – the planet you call Cybertron.’

He looked at Ultra Magnus. ‘There. It was worth the wait, wasn’t it?’

Magnus shrugged. ‘You expect me to believe that Cybertron was originally your planet? That we Transformers are the colonists?’

‘I think squatters is a more appropriate term.’

‘This is madness! I’ve read reports that trace Cybertron’s geological lineage back sixty million years!’

‘And no doubt your archaeologists found compacted layers of honeycombed metal, evidence of previous Cybertronian generations and traces of organic matter. Maybe they even found some of the original Progenitors and their short-lived planetary successors, the Argalians... Nothing they dig up can contradict the truth, Magnus, only underline it.’

‘So you’re saying that the Masters’ nanobots reformatted Quintyxia,’ said Galvatron. ‘Why? Why not just destroy it?’



Ultra Magnus rounded on him. ‘You mean to say you’re buying this?! Do you realise what he’s saying, Galvatron? He’s saying that Primus – God – is nothing more than an advanced piece of software!’

‘Ignore him,’ said Xenon. ‘If he didn’t believe me, he wouldn’t be so worried.’

‘You haven’t answered my question, Xenon.’

‘The nanos were supposed to kill us and collect the buried geode, but it didn’t quite go to plan. When the nanos came into contact with the geode, it reached out to them. It gave them life.’

‘Have you never wondered *why* Cybertron is metallic? Have you never asked why it isn’t a rich, regenerative organic world? The geode could have easily restored Quintyxia to its former glory, but no, it had other things on its mind. It had some Big Questions. It wanted to know who and what and why it was, just like every other freethinking being. To get some answers, to fathom its own sentience, it used the nanobots to transform the planet into an extension of its own body.’

Ultra Magnus waved for him to stop. ‘Wait, wait... so your saying that the geode used the nanobots to alter Quintyxia – Cybertron – into what, a planet-sized decoder?’

‘Exactly. The Cybertron we touched down upon all those years ago wasn’t like the Cybertron of today, or the Cybertron of your so-called Golden Age. There were no space-scrapers or Great Domes, just hard drives the size of continents. The nanos transformed layer after layer of Quintyxia’s crust into extensions of the geode: branches of a supercomputer designed to crunch numbers and crack code.’

‘But it didn’t work, right?’ Ultra Magnus looked at Galvatron, wanting assurances. ‘What happened, Xenon? Why are you smiling? You’re saying that the decoder actually *worked*?’

‘Of course! The Lifecode was cracked and, suddenly, new life could be created from scratch. Unfortunately, there was no blueprint, no guiding hand. We touched down on our newly metallic planet to find robotic husks clinging like limpets to the landscape. They were ovoid or tetrahedral or splayed like crooked stars – the most basic forms imaginable. So you see, the first Cybertronians were little more than building blocks clustered around a few hot spots where the planet’s crust was pure nerve-circuitry. We called these areas birthfields.’

‘The nanobots seemed to have disappeared, so we began reshaping our planet. At first we turned the technology inwards, enhancing our bodies with cybernetic implants. We then set about creating a slave race. We created brain modules – Seedlings – and literally sowed them into the birthfields. The geode and the nerve-circuitry did the rest, breathing life into them and helping them grow. I doubt you’ve ever seen the earth itself rise up and clothe a glistening thought-core, or watched questing tongues of warm steel wrap themselves around a trembling endoskeleton. It is breathtaking.’

‘The resultant mechanoids were dragged from the crust in what became known as the Harvest. A lot of early Harvests threw up half-formed mutants which were sealed underground and forgotten about, but as time went on and we became more skilled, we created near-perfect examples of freethinking, bipedal mechanica. Autonomous Robots, we called them: Auto-Bots for short. In the end, we were drafting blueprints for each individual Auto-Bot.’ Xenon gestured to the body-pods below. ‘Remember what I said about re-using old designs?’

‘Over the next few thousand years we harvested thousands of Auto-Bots and used them to reformat Quintyxia into a world approaching that which you live on today. As numbers grew it became harder to keep control, and we hit upon the perfect means of mass enslavement: religion. We had our top theoscientists write the Primal Pentateuch, the cornerstone of your faith, to ensure obedience. In a sense, we turned P.R.I.M.U.S. into Primus.’

‘No!’ cried Ultra Magnus. ‘I will not tolerate this blasphemy!’ (And this surprised him, because until now he hadn’t considered himself a god-fearing robot.)

‘We built a temple near the centre of the planet, moulded around the face we’d chosen to give your “god”. In retrospect, I suppose we were merely adding fuel to the geode’s messianic fire, embellishing the god-complex it had been cultivating since being programmed with the Lifecode. The geode itself believed the lies we were spreading, you see. In the long run we were going to cast ourselves as Light Gods and Dark Lords, but the book was never finished.’ For the first time Xenon’s face darkened. He leant forward, anticipating Galvatron’s question. ‘It was never finished,’ he growled, ‘because the Auto-Bots rebelled. Our plan backfired. Instead of making them passive and servile, religion gave them purpose, and with purpose came a desire to throw off their chains and preach the Primal message. The rebellion itself was masterminded by fourteen crusaders; I think they called themselves the Covenant. We’d grown arrogant

and complacent, and did not foresee the attack. We were once again forced to flee Quintyxia, this time pursued by the Covenant's leader, Maximo, a maniac who'd kick-started the rebellion after breaking into the Primal Chamber and momentarily interfacing with the geode. He took with him the more violent rebels. I gather most of the Covenant left soon after.'

'I've never heard of this Covenant,' said Galvatron.

'I do not know what became of them. Perhaps they're still out there, searching for the Antiprimus, ready to defend a Grand Plan sketched out by a mid-rank backroom theoscientist, Quaypa, with time on his hands. I think they left a representative behind, though. He was tasked with moulding the masses into a peaceful, democratic society. He didn't have a name originally. None of you did. I think he called himself Primon.'

'You can't tell me that the foundations of our faith are made of sand,' said Ultra Magnus. 'What about Book 1 of the Pentateuch? What about the Eugenesis Code? Our best theoscientists spent millions of years trying to unlock those secrets! How could a race such as yours have written something so unfathomable, so baroque?'

'Yes, I admit we did not compose those famous stanzas. We suspected that some Auto-Bots would be suspicious of the religion foisted upon them and so added something in that would seem other-worldly by dint of its complexity. We copied the "Eugenesis Code" from the installation manual that came with the geodes. Something about intellectual copyright.'

'Now I *know* you're lying.'

'I can even quote the geode's serial number if you like: 4/11.002983712.'

'The deathcode?' Magnus turned to Galvatron, desperate for someone to share his horror. 'This can't be happening.'

'Only a handful of us survived the Rebellion,' continued Xenon. 'In our ships and shuttles we wandered the Galactic Rim, avoiding Maximo and writing what became known as the Old Texts. That all changed when we found Quiniad; or rather, Quiniad found us. You see, in their rush to escape the White Sector all those millions of years ago, the Weavers had accidentally damaged one of the geodes they had stolen, and in so doing triggered the hidden virus.'

'The virus was designed to purge the Lifecode, but in attempting to do so it became sentient. It immediately realised that the whole universe was stained with sentience, with life; therefore, to fulfil its overwhelming objective, it had to destroy everything.'

'Unicron,' said Galvatron. 'The virus called itself Unicron... and if there's a virus in every geode, it would mean there's a potential Unicron in every Matrix.'

'Of course.'

'You said Quiniad found you and the other Progenitors,' said Ultra Magnus. 'What did you mean?'

'Quiniad had been reformatted into Unicron. The damaged geode had used the nanobots to reshape its prison into a mobile engine of destruction. He could interface with "Primus", and so became embroiled in the Yin/Yang mythology we'd built up around the two of them.'

'Anyway, Unicron intercepted us and tricked us into trusting him. We had no idea of his origins at the time. He branched our DNA to create a new generation of hybrids called Neoseeds. Some of them, like Ghyrik, actually shared a piece of Him, and therefore had access to the geode. The "Rebirth" he promised us in return for our allegiance was nothing more than a stagnation of our gene pool. Implanting mechanical brain modules meant that there was no way to create future generations. He made us impotent. We were forced to act as his enforcers, tracking and killing his enemies.'

'And here we are now,' sneered Galvatron. 'Millions of years on. Unicron is dead and you have your planet back. Who said there was no such thing as a happy ending?'

'You should be grateful that I'm putting an end to your sparkline. I am removing you all in one fell swoop and putting something more deserving, more worthwhile, in your place.'

Ultra Magnus pointed to the eugenic pods. 'Why are these robots more deserving of life than we are?'

'Because they will not waste it by fighting and killing. They will not throw life away as you and I have done. I did not build warriors; I built people. Free to live independently, as is their right. And who are you to deny them that?'

'Give us the Matrix, call off the invasion force, and we will leave.' Ultra Magnus held up a hand to silence a protesting Galvatron. 'You can have your "children", Xenon. We will take what is ours and return to our world.'

'I'm sorry, but it doesn't work like that. You had millions years to sort out your differences. We won our freedom when Unicron died in 2006, and we intend to make the most of it. I will, however, allow you to witness the birth of your successors.'

He drew wires from a control panel and plugged them into receptors in his skull. Waves of enervating power flowed like honeyed milk into the birthing pods and ten thousand optics opened wide. Xenon ascended to a new height, stretching his anti-grav column until it thinned to a needle. Weightless and ecstatic, with only the taut connection wires preventing him from rising further, he blanked every outside influence and transmitted the Lifecode.

Ten thousand bodies sat bolt upright simultaneously, moisture evaporating from their bodies in swirls of cottoned steam. Ten thousand heads moved as one, following the same imaginary point of interest. They stood up in tandem, steadied themselves with the same hand, blinked the same blink, and turned as one to look at their master.

Xenon crashed to the floor, half-entangled with the railings. He was whimpering. 'Zombies! They're all zombies! Why? It should have worked. It should have worked.'

Ultra Magnus picked up his gun. 'You're an idiot, Xenon. This is what happens when you tamper with the wellspring. Whatever you say, the Matrix cannot be tamed and channelled like water. It controlled you, and gave you the illusion of power because it chose to. It's used to people playing god.'

'No, it's more than that; it's your fault, not mine. Yes. Yes! I can see it now. I understand. There's a problem with the Matrix... The virus – Unicron. He's inside it. He's been released. I can hear Him. He's inside my head. Oh my god, *he's inside my head!*

'Don't play games, Xenon. Call off the invasion.'

'I've given you enough rope, Magnus. Now it's my turn.' Galvatron placed the barrel of his rifle against Xenon's scalp.

'Wait!' called Ultra Magnus. 'It doesn't have to end like this!'

'Yes it does. This is my favourite part.' Galvatron fired, and Xenon's head – and therefore his entire body – burst open, spreading the walkway with techno-organic components.

Magnus stepped back before the tide of warm lubricant curled around his boots. 'Urgh. Are you happy now?'

'Not quite.' Galvatron leant over the railings and surveyed the lines of automatons, still waiting patiently for direction and purpose. 'These robots are mentally interlinked, wouldn't you say?'

'They seem connected at base level, yes. Why?'

Galvatron took aim and shot the nearest robot – a slim Ironhide look-a-like – in the head. Ten thousand bodies reacted to the kill-shot, ten thousand CPUs blinked out, ten thousand morphcores cooled, and ten thousand dead bodies hit the floor at the same time. Smoke rose from their widened eyes and rolled against the supercomputer that had helped create them: G.O.D. had re-materialised, its cloak of invisibility having fallen to the floor.

'Now that *was* satisfying,' smiled Galvatron, swivelling to re-aim his weapon. 'Take one step closer, Magnus, and I'll punch a hole in your Pretender shell.'

'You bastard! They were innocent beings! They were alive!'

'Hmm, perhaps I did make a mistake. Perhaps I should have killed them before I killed Xenon.' Galvatron ran towards the door. 'Come on. Let's get out of here.'

'Wait!' Magnus started feeling his way along G.O.D.'s glossy casing. 'This must be the decoder Xenon used to extrapolate the Lifeforce.'

'I thought you didn't believe him.'

'Just because he was delusional doesn't mean he didn't feed his fantasies. The Matrix is inside here somewhere.' Magnus pressed and prodded until he found an access panel. He pulled off his glove and pushed his arm in up to the shoulder. 'Just give me a moment...'

'You're the delusional one,' said Galvatron, turning to go. After a few steps he swung round, ready to berate his companion again, and saw that Ultra Magnus was floating above the walkway, in ecstatic posture. Shafts of divine light were breaking through the cracks in his Pretender shell. His arm was still trapped in the supercomputer.

'Magnus?'

'Help me. Help me.'

The Autobot's voice was unlike anything Galvatron had ever heard; it was the sound that a Transformer's mind would make if he lip-read the 'suicide code' and nothing happened; if the barcode 4/11.002983712 passed unnoticed from memnet to neural cluster. It was the sound the first Autonomous Robots made when industrial magnets sucked them from Quintyxia's birthfields 60 million years ago; when AR0001 and his fellow Seedlings were moulded from techno-genetic putty by a rabble of Quintesson engineers to be told that they were destined for great things.

Galvatron took aim and fired, severing Magnus' arm at the shoulder. The celestial light had dimmed but something was still stirring behind his eyes.

'I'm okay. I just – I'm sorry, where am I?'

But Galvatron had already run away.

Magnus forgot the fluttering in his stomach when he realised that he was kneeling in Xenon's bio-fluids. In an instant, he remembered. He sprang to his feet and reached the vault door; behind him, the computer was falling apart and hunks of debris were flattening the corpses. The glow in the birthing tubes faded in sequence, like street lamps dying at dawn.

He ran after Galvatron, leaving his arm behind.

He didn't see one of Xenon's tentacles begin to twitch on the walkway. He didn't see the outward spread of sticky green lubricant reverse its flow. It pulled back over spilt innards and renegotiated a blast radius of half-melted steel. A resealed fuel pump accepted the lifeblood and forced a spark across thinly spread circuit boards. Separated components were reunited in a flurry of magnetism and contact soldering. The brain module rooted itself to the nerve centre and relaxed. The scalp leapt up to embrace the brain, five faces swivelled back into place, and the resurrected Xenon launched himself on a vibrant column of antigravity.

Optimus Prime watched Thundercracker and Frenzy leap from the Autoshuttle and beckoned them over.

'It worked, then? Nightbeat retrieved you from 1986?'

'Yes,' said Thundercracker, 'but he didn't tell me what was going on. Who are we fighting?'

'The less you know the better. Are you in peak condition?'

'Well yes, but—'

'Good.' Optimus opened his wrist comm. 'Ratchet? It's me. He's here. Send Soundwave immediately.' He looked at Thundercracker, who was cowering in the shadows and staring at his feet, terrified.

'If it's any consolation, Nightbeat stole me from the past too. I'm as out of time as you are.'

'But why are we needed at all? Where's the Thundercracker of 2013?'

Optimus paused. 'Missing. Lost in space.'

Ratchet crouched behind Delphi's entrance doors, which were bulging with the weight of Sharkticons fighting to get inside, and glanced at Fulcrum. 'Where's Soundwave? Still hooked up?'

'I'm right here,' said the robot in question, walking up the corridor with an acid rifle in each hand. He gestured to his re-attached chest plate, helmet and torsal shields. 'I had to get dressed.'

The entrance doors flew apart, laserfire rippled the ceiling, and the deafening sound of canyon warfare reverberated through the corridors. Ratchet stood on the threshold and drained his weapons as Sharkticons poured into the foyer.

When enough Quintesson front-liners had blocked the entrance with their bodies, Sevax, Ryknia and Jolup entered the fray. Their Transformer-like appearance gave Fulcrum, Ratchet and Soundwave a moment of pause. It cost them dear. The body-snatchers piled on top of them, raining punches.

Sevax crushed Soundwave's shoulder cannon and lunged for his optics. The communications officer caught his hands and stared at his attacker's face. 'You!'

Sevax froze. 'You recognise me?'

Soundwave head-butted Sevax and ran outside. Optimus Prime pulled him behind a hollowed-out Trident, where Thundercracker and Frenzy were waiting.

'What's happened to you, Scourge? Someone change you back?'

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I’m afraid we don’t have time for explanations,’ said Optimus. ‘Listen carefully, Frenzy. On my signal, I want you to release a looped decibel charge, maximum range. Can you tailor it to disorient auditory systems?’

‘Sure. Yeah. Whatever.’

‘Thundercracker, when Frenzy lets loose, I want you to generate full-scale sonic booms.’

‘How many?’

‘Trust me, you’ll know when to stop.’

‘I see where this is going,’ said Soundwave. ‘I take it you want me to—’

‘Send an internal message to all our troops. Tell them to shut down their auditory links immediately after your transmission.’

Moments later, every Autobot and Decepticon, no matter how barely functional, no matter how fatigued, heard a voice in their head. Some thought that this was it, this was the Fifth Epoch, this was the voice of Primus; others ignored it, putting it down to insanity or some cross-wired memfile.

Ryknia heard it as he delivered a punch that took Gutcruncher permanently off-line. He peeled lank facial wiring from his fingers, pulled Jolup off an unconscious Fulcrum, and tapped his head. ‘Are you getting this, guys?’

‘Yeah, some kind of internal order,’ said Jolup. ‘It’s these Decepticon bodies; we’re picking it up by default. What do we do?’

‘Exactly as we’re told.’

Outside, Frenzy did as he was told, for once: he rolled the drum-like devices in his torso and unleashed a 300 decibel blast. Quintessons and Sharkticons dropped their weapons, lost their footing and tried to stuff their hands into their heads: anything to block the noise. Their screams were a mere whisper compared to the sound scalding their eyes, their mouth, their skin. It was too much to even contemplate what was actually happening.

Then it was Thundercracker’s turn. He transformed into jet mode, spun gracefully over the howling soldiers, and unleashed a sonic boom.

Many Autobots had, at some point in their lives, borne the brunt of Thundercracker’s unique ‘talent’. Until 2006, it was more or less accepted that sooner or later, in some battle or other, the Decepticon would open fire and you would crash to your knees, hands clamped against your head, too disoriented to close down your receptors.

Ratchet had often described the effects of Thundercracker’s infamous, tried-and-tested sonic boom. Even after the sound had rolled itself flat, he said, even after it had petered into silence, neural systems struggled to regain balance. The delicate world of tri-focal retnets, audioboards and cerebral gauze would be torn to shreds, and your cranial shell, stuffed as it is with inter-feeds and cross-wax, would be nudging meltdown.

No one had ever *died* from the sonic blast before. But then no one had ever heard it in the Sonic Canyons of Southern Cybertron.

Less than a second elapsed between release and reverb, but in this time the canyons grabbed the sound and rolled it over every cleft and rounded slope, transforming it into a universe of white noise. Simply put, the Quintessons’ heads went nova: a thousand explosions overlapped and weaved smog over the battlefield. Autobots and Decepticons watched a new world unfold: a world of slick, slack, matt-black splatter, of gluey sheen and neck-flame, of head-segments and facial bark, hot oil and grey matter.

It would take just over an hour for the echoes to reach bearable levels, and even then some Transformers who had shut down early would be leaking oil from their eyes.

Sixty miles away Quantax picked himself off the floor, leaving behind two neat pools of audio-receptor lubricant. It took some time for his optic filaments to properly arrange the images on the monitor screen, and even longer for him to remember where and who he was. With memory came despair, and the realisation that it was all over.

He activated the autopilot and prepared to make a break for it. He didn’t belong here anymore. He knew what to do: the perfect getaway was already mapped out in his head. He would use the wormhole to escape tangentially, putting time rather than distance between himself and the Cybertronians. Why travel a million miles when you could travel a million years? A to X, not A to B. He could go backwards or forwards or sideways, wedging a safe temporal gulf between Here/Now and Then/There.

He settled into the pilot's seat and headed for the Acid Wastes.

'Did you see that?'

'Oh god oh god oh god oh god oh god...'

'Sevax, will you shut up!? Jolup, punch him out!'

'I'm okay, I'm okay! It's just – their *heads*...'

The three Quintecons were picking their way through a carpet of Quintesson bodies.

'I've never known anyone to blabber via internal radio,' said Jolup. 'Everyone's dead. Deal with it.'

Ryknia pointed to the horizon. 'Look, guys: Quantax is splitting on us.'

'Where's he heading?'

'Good question. Let's find out.'

When Optimus Prime rebooted his audio receptors he'd expected to hear a wave of top-heavy reverb and some standard reception crackle. He was unprepared for the frantic, fuzz-box yells coming from his wrist communicator:

'What the hell happened, Optimus? You've not been responding!'

'Nightbeat? I think we've just won.'

'Good. Great. Wonderful. You know what? I'm still panicking. The wormhole's closing up. I need you and Thundercracker back here immediately.'

'There are still a number of Tridents to take care of. I'll be there as soon as—'

'I'm not giving you a choice. In a few moments one of two things will happen: the wormhole will contract and disappear, or the Acid Wastes will be scraped off the face of the planet. Either way, you'll be stuck here, 30 years ahead of yourself, and then what? Best case scenario, we're all stuck in some weird alternate universe. Worst case scenario, Time Wars II. So get Thundercracker, get transport, and get down here *now!*'

'We're going round in circles!' yelled Ultra Magnus, and punched the wall with his one remaining arm. 'What do we do now?'

'What do we do now?' mimicked Galvatron in his best 'whining Magnus' voice. 'Look, last time round I grabbed some telearmour and jumped to Cybertron. I didn't need to look for a way out.'

Another quake pulled the ceiling open in a downpour of rust and osmium piping. Death's Head and Siren fell into the corridor, both looking the worse for wear.

'Should have guessed it was you two, eh?' snorted Death's Head. 'Who else argues when the world's falling apart?'

'What happened to your arm, Magnus?' asked Siren.

'It's a long story.'

Siren proudly held up the Matrix. 'Look what we found. Some Quint had it hanging 'round his neck, attached to a trembler device.'

Ultra Magnus looked at the Matrix as if it was about to explode. Had Xenon been telling the truth? Was the Primal repository just an alien supercomputer imbued with sentient software? A glowing ball of mass-produced thought glass that had been stolen, stashed and studied for millions of years before it was even glimpsed by Cybertronian eyes? Could everything – their race, their religion, their destiny – be traced back to an interstellar smash and grab by a race of arrogant scientists eager to escape into the Metarealm? It didn't bear thinking about.

'Everyone follow me,' said Death's Head, and led them onto a balcony overlooking the main hangar, where a feeble sprinkler system flicked rainbows of dirty water onto a single line of Tridents. A broken lighting rig hung from the eaves and touched the floor.

They were climbing down the rigging when a rectangular warp-gate appeared at the far side of the hangar, too huge and violent to make any sound. Dotted with neutrino-fields, flux-matter and warp gleam, the light it threw did not so much bounce off the rest of the hangar as pass through it, searching for surfaces that could truly capture its essence.

‘Ignore it!’ ordered Ultra Magnus, reaching the floor. ‘Don’t look at it, don’t go near it.’

‘But where does it lead?’ Siren asked. ‘Do you think we could use it to esc—’

Siren screamed as laserbolts snapped hunks off his shoulders. Another shot knocked him off his feet.

Xenon appeared on the balcony, pistols in his tentacles. Galvatron and Death’s Head gamely returned fire. The Majestrix slithered across the rigging and dropped in front of the warp-gate.

‘Defeat is a small price to pay for immortality,’ he cried, and backed into the light. ‘Maybe I cannot create new life, but I can preserve my own. The Lifecode protects me, you see. I think of it and I am recast! When you slump and rot think only of me, and how I will outlive the stars!’

He sank into the portal, which immediately began to contract.

Galvatron tore the Scraplet from his neck and threw it into the warp-gate. ‘Now we can get out of here,’ he said.

Ultra Magnus climbed into a Trident, a leaking Siren thrown over his one good shoulder. ‘See you on the other side,’ he said, sealing the cockpit.

The hangar walls began to crack, spilling *aqua fortis* across the floor. Death’s Head offered Galvatron his hand. ‘If we don’t see each other again, there’s one thing I’d like to do before we go.’

‘Now is really not the time, bounty hunter,’ Galvatron snapped, but gave his hand nonetheless.

Death’s Head wrenched the Decepticon’s arm from its socket. It dissolved the moment it hit the water. ‘Now we’re even, yes?’

Re-routing his sense-circuits to stem the pain, Galvatron considered climbing into Death’s Head’s Trident and dismantling him by hand, but his wound was vulnerable to the sprinkler spray, and he was somewhat concerned that the water around his waist had just reached boiling point. He boarded a Trident and postponed his revenge, little knowing that he would never see Death’s Head again.

The walls crumbled like icing. When the ocean had reclaimed every inch of its deep-sea air pocket, the Tridents flew into the abyss. After an eternity of cross-currents and pressure pockets, the three ships broke the sizzling surface and ploughed through layers of cloud. The world outside was one of zero visibility, of atmospheric turbulence and winds that could remould steel.

‘It feels as if the planet is breaking up,’ said Siren, slumped in the back seat. ‘Whatever the Quintessons did down there, it wasn’t good. What do you reckon? Energon skims? Core mining?’

‘Unfortunately,’ replied Ultra Magnus, trying to pilot a Trident with one hand, ‘I’m a little preoccupied at the moment.’ He looked down at a dashboard he didn’t understand, wondering whether five extra fingers would have made any difference anyway. The tugging sensation at the back of his head was distracting him too; he’d only felt such a sensation once before, and that was when he came on-line for the first time.

The clouds thinned, and after a series of grav-wells and vortices, the Tridents reached the orbital rim. Galvatron had mentally avoided the very concept of atmospheric breakdown, afraid that the thought of getting this far and being crushed into a pellet would sap any will to live. Now, as he crossed the final barrier, he felt gravitational forces making one last-ditch attempt to hold him back. He detonated the liquidene fuel packs and won a final rush of propulsion.

Ultra Magnus copied Galvatron’s slingshot manoeuvre and achieved breakaway velocity. The planet howled as another got away, venting its fury with skystorms and wind tunnels, and then suddenly, as it reached an exquisite point of deterioration, it began to fall apart.

‘Where’s Death’s Head?’ asked Siren, now that Aquaria was receding in the viewscreen. ‘Not that I care.’

‘He was last out of the hangar,’ said Ultra Magnus. ‘I don’t think – oh my god. Oh my *god*.’

Why hadn’t he seen it sooner? Floating like driftwood and lost to the soft curves of deep space, there was Thermopylae – or what was left of it. The spacecruiser was now nothing more than a brittle flake of ligament and femur; old bones stripped of meat. It had been devoured in a flurry of teeth and acid. Millions of Scraplets were still eating, still spreading, still splitting and dividing.

Anaemic Quintesson bodies hung crucified in zero gravity; a choir of comatose angels strung up by starlight, buoyed by the void, each one sieving the gleam of distant constellations through an archive of body-holes. Xenon was among them, half-swallowed, half-digested. His remains had been chewed to a rust-ridden, finger-bitten endoskeleton, a thatch of matchsticks brushed with hunger scars and graphite. His brain module had been devoured and dispersed, shared among ingestion tracts and acid sacs.

'I've seen enough,' said Ultra Magnus, piloting the Trident away from the horror-show, away from the wasted food. 'There's only so much you can take in one day.'

'I agree,' said Siren. 'We'll soon get you back to Delphi and have Cloudraker patch up your – oh! Your fixed! When did you find the time to do that?'

Ultra Magnus looked down and saw his new arm for the first time. 'I – I don't know... It just – it just...'

'You've had enough excitement for one day,' said Siren, climbing into the pilot's seat and pushing Magnus aside. 'Let me take the wheel.'

Ultra Magnus climbed into the back seat and hugged the Matrix. 'Yes, let's go home. Please.'

Galvatron was already way ahead, afraid that a homing Scraplet would latch onto his outer hull. Soon the Autobots caught up with him and the two ships flew side by side. When they had travelled as far as their meagre fuel supplies allowed, when the flakes and shavings of Scraplet-studded cadavers had decongested into a loose, dark-particle fog, a beautiful arc of light outshone the distant stars.

Aquaria had exploded.

Death's Head knew, from the moment he had escaped the water, from the moment the pearls of moisture had evaporated in the Trident's screaming retro-jets, that he wasn't going to make it. In this meteorological purgatory, where the wind blew the rain horizontally, where chunks of tarred rock leapt from the sea itself, there was no such thing as a second chance.

While the others had steamed ahead, he'd simply stopped moving. The Trident's thrusters were kicking sparks, struggling through force of habit. In less than three minutes the fuel tanks would choke on red dust and he would back-flip to his death, sucked towards the planet's collapsing core and crushed/snapped/boiled by whatever obstacles lay in-between.

Still, there was always Plan B, he thought, pulling open his chest plate. Underneath was a device that, although small enough to sit snugly in the palm, contained some of the most advanced technology in the galaxy. The only one of its kind, the summation of years of work, painstakingly pieced together by Decepticon scientists: a *bona fide* time-trigger.

Just over a year ago, going by his internal clock, he'd returned to Cybertron with Rodimus Prime, Kup, Blurr and Wreck-Gar after a disastrous foray in 1987. He'd stolen the time-trigger from Wreck-Gar, who in turn had stolen it from Galvatron – fair's fair, right? Okay, so maybe he'd used a little more force and a little less stealth...but the Junkion had been rebuilt, no harm done.

He congratulated himself on his foresight, resealed his chest and checked the box for dents. It looked okay. He could return to 2007 at the touch of a button.

The engines yawned, the last of the fuel smeared an empty tank, the thrusters gave way and he found himself being dragged towards the ocean. He held Plan B against the faint dashboard light, flipped the lid and stared at the reassuringly oversized button – big and bright and red.

He pressed the button. Nothing happened.

He pressed it again.

And again.

And again.

*My name is Nightbeat. I've led an interesting life.*

*Function: Investigator. Biocode: A/000007. On-line: 3<sup>rd</sup> Cycle 270 (Matrixed). Autobranded: 3<sup>rd</sup> Cycle 892.*

*I was constructed cold – you know, without biomorphic reproduction. The first of an experimental breed, non-affiliated to any genocode or bioline. Robots that cheated nature, we were built outside the bleep and cold-pulse of a metal womb. Manufactured without morphcore division, we rejected the birth body. An Antimorph, they called me, and worse. My brain module was pieced together from scratch, made from test sounds and discarded parts; it was creased and knitted in a lab somewhere, on a table somewhere, a very long time ago.*

*They say something went wrong at the programming stage: a rudimentary error affected my logic centre. Basically, I was wired-up wrong. Is that why I feel the way I feel and think the way I think? Did some thin white scientist, some long dead tech-head, plug A into C instead of B? Was he daydreaming about maths and paradigms when he should have been making me normal?*



*You'll forgive the melodrama, I hope.*

*So yes, I was an accident, an 'unfortunate error', a by-product of an experiment that pushed boundaries ('Bound to be risks', they said), an upward step towards a new evolutionary plateau ('Learn from our mistakes'). Among the high-shine production line Perfects and Neobreeds, I was the glorious failure. I was damaged goods, kinked and flawed. It's not so bad. You get used to it.*

*I don't recall the Creation Ceremony, or the way the sunlight fell across the spires, or the pressure cannons used to disperse the protestors, or the way an ailing Sentinel Prim, a breath away from circuitburn, needed help to lift the Matrix, but I'm told it was all very exciting. I do remember coming on-line: a painful twist of bristling energy and download throb as I braved the weight of unused limbs.*

*Look, I don't have much time. Let's speed things up.*

*I'm dropped off in Kalis and given a low-grade manual job and weekly energon rations in exchange for regular attendance at the Academy. In humourless surgeries I'm poked and prodded, bombarded with tests, measured against the world. They soon conclude that I'm 'psychologically flawed' and concentrate on the rest of the First Wave, all of whom are deemed to be 'of excellent character'. In an era of dwindling energy resources and, for the first time, fear of the future, the success of the other Antimorphs is enough to convince Sentinel Prime to ban biomorphic reproduction, which is phenomenally fuel consuming. If new Cybertronians became essential, they would be made to order.*

*Steady now. This is where it starts going downhill:*

*Megatron forms a rogue faction and declares war. He does far better than anyone expects him to. I volunteer for the Autobot army, serve under Grimlock and Triax and Maximus, meet up with Siren and Hosehead (long story), and somehow gain a reputation for being lateral and off-centre. A problem solver, an introvert and a troublemaker, I collect tags and personality soundbites as I move between rebel cells. Somewhere along the line I'm roped into the binary bonding process, merge with a young human nick-named Muzzle, and you know what? I'm a success. I set the standard.*

*Except Muzzle dies. My best friend dies. I hide out in Delphi and think too much. Then I get handpicked by High Command to go on a mission so secret it borders on the hypothetical. See what I'm doing now? I'm slowing down, giving details – it's understandable. Now being now, and all.*

*So I track down a naturally occurring wormhole and travel in time, removing key players and building paradoxes in my head – am I arranging or re-arranging or de-arranging the Order of Things? I don't think I'll ever know, because theory is theory and that's all we have. And now the wormhole's closing, and it's dragging the rest of Cybertron with it. And is it just me, or is the end of the world a long time coming?*

*My name is Nightbeat. I think I'm going to die tonight.*

'You okay?'

'Hm?' Nightbeat wondered how long Red Alert's hand had been on his shoulder. 'I'm fine. Just thinking.'

The sky over the Acid Wastes was now the colour and texture of dead skin: pored and scabby, grazed with old blood and lesions. It had a way of holding your attention, especially near the edges (yes, this sky had edges – a strap of black padding where even the horizon seemed to withdraw its hand). Soon there would be more lightning, hard and urgent, trying to make contact with every patch of ground. Yes, thought Nightbeat, the backdrop was doing its part, but where was the main player? Where was Optimus?

'You reckon he's going to show?'

Nightbeat almost smiled. It was difficult to move anything, even his lips, in this heat. 'Am I that transparent?'

'No, you're just thinking the same thing as everyone else.'

'Then tell everyone else that Prime will be coming over that hill any minute now.'

He watched Red Alert head back to his lookout post, an upturned cradle of steel outside the temple entrance. The security officer leant into embers as he walked, braving the ferocious wormhole heat, no doubt thinking about tomorrow, about whether there would be a tomorrow (and if there was, would it carry on from today, or would it mark the beginning of a whole new timeline?).

The wormhole had become half sized, and though it still framed a patch of rock from 1986, each inward shrug reduced Prime's chances of going home. Would they have to make do with tossing his tiny, naked brain module through the eye of the needle?

He had been scanning the skyline for so long now that he nearly missed the new arrival. But when the UFO swerved to evade a downpour of acid rain, he took notice. He brought his wrist to his mouth, flicked open a comms pad and stopped. That wasn't the Autos Shuttle. Autos Shuttles weren't green, and they didn't open fire on their own side.

General Quantax laughed when he first saw the long-range pictures ('Four of them? Is that the best they can do?'), but his face soon settled. It suddenly occurred to him: what if the wormhole had shut down? What if there were no means of escape? He needed a failsafe, a rehearsal. He decided that if the wormhole worked he would use it to jump backwards in time to the bridge of the landcruiser as it roared towards the temple. He looked around expectantly, ready for his future self to materialise.

Hmm.

Nothing.

He decided he was destined to come up with a better plan. He hoped it would come to him quickly, because lasers were already bouncing off his viewscreen.

Centurion would never know that it was his shot, his combination of human squint and timing, which grounded the enemy. The landcruiser's fuel tank exploded, sweeping blue flame across the undercarriage and puncturing more hotspots. The viewscreen tore itself apart, lightning lanced the rear thrusters, and the landcruiser crashed onto the plateau.

The Autobots stood their ground, firing in harmony, hoping to shred the somersaulting vehicle before it hit the temple. Nightbeat imagined the cockpit of a Quintesson warcruiser poking into 1986, a dead Quintesson at the controls. Explain *that* one.

In the end, the plateau saved them. Geo-tremors pulled open a crevasse wide enough to swallow the tumbling speedster. It sat in the gap, fat and aflame, an optimistic thruster still chalking the sky.

Nightbeat watched Trailbreaker jog towards the wreckage. 'Don't do it,' he said to himself, and then, out loud: 'It's not safe!'

'I have to know *who*,' called Trailbreaker, climbing onto the buckled nose and peering through the glass. Quantax's shots knocked him to the floor, where smoke streamed from his mouth.

Hound and Red Alert would have rushed in, manhandled their friend, patched his wound and offered fuel; they would have, if the planes hadn't come. Sevax, Ryknia and Jolup flew nose-down to the wind, as if propelled by invisible shockwaves. They were the unholy trinity, forever triangulated. They fired without aim or mercy, nipping chunks from the upturned landcruiser, unstitching Trailbreaker's leg from his body and shaving mortar from the temple doors. Enough damage done, they transformed and landed.

'They're Decepticons!' exclaimed Centurion, holding fire as the threesome moved closer.

'They're not ours,' declared Nightbeat with a certainty he could not explain. He refused to accept that the Alliance had already collapsed, and that these three unknowns were the first dissenters. 'Autobots: clip their wings.'

But the Quinticons were fast, and managed to avoid the blizzard of gunfire. Sevax hid behind a fresh gravestone of metal and turned to Ryknia. 'I can see it! The chrono-euclidia! It's inside the building!'

'What do the Old Texts say about usage, Sevax?'

"'Bent to a tyrant's touch / the euclidia shrinks and burns anew / And wends a backward way through time...'"

'Summarise!'

'We, er, just walk through it thinking about the same time and place.'

'We take these Cybes out first,' Jolup snapped. 'Quick and efficient, nothing tacky.' He leapt headlong into the fray and Ryknia followed suit, hoping that his comrade would serve as the Autobots' primary target.

Nightbeat ran away from the battle, leaving Centurion to fend for himself against Sevax. Hound would have to tackle Ryknia, and poor Red Alert – still recovering from his injuries – would need to face Jolup alone. He was running because Quantax, having pulled himself from the sandwiched landcruiser, had just disappeared inside the temple.

A mercy dash, an outstretched leap, arms wrapped around legs, shoulder pressed against the weak tubing of a damaged knee, and the only surviving general of the Quintesson army came crashing to the floor. Wasn't so hard, Nightbeat thought, before a fist buckled the aperture in his throat.

Quantax swivelled free. As the blows reigned down, Nightbeat did not know where to turn. Either way, a head-flick left or right, and the Quintesson's fists seemed to connect, each one leaving a deeper dent. How long before a barbed knuckle started mashing internal circuitry?

He caught Quantax's fist and squeezed. 'You don't know what you're doing,' he slurred. 'The wormhole's dangerous. Are you listening to me? It's not to be tampered with.'

'Tampered with? I am second in line to Xenon himself! I'll do more than *tamper* with it! I'll violate its every nerve and flux!' He scrambled to his feet and sprinted for the portal.

Nightbeat transformed, ramped a mound of debris and knocked Quantax aside. The Quintesson rolled down the altar and sank under the fumes.

Nightbeat waded into the energy dregs, twitchy and disoriented, mindful of the gaping crevasse underneath. The empty space beneath his boot was a warning too late: like a detonating landmine, Quantax burst from the mist, slashed him across the chest, and dived out of sight.

Nightbeat's felt the wound and he staggered backwards onto the altar, staring at the oil leaking between his fingers. Could he really see Muzzle's orb against his palm, or was he imagining things, was he dulled with fever? The heat on his back reminded him how close he was – how stupidly close – to the wormhole.

'Come on, Quantax. Whatever you're hoping to do, it isn't going to work. What's the plan, eh? Time-jump to 2008 and alter the course of the original invasion? Can't be done. Travel back millions of years and become leader of the Quintessons? Can't be done. Or perhaps go back just a few hours so that we never come to blows? Can't be done.'

'And you know *why* it can't be done, Quantax? Because Perceptor was right. Because History is immutable. Past History, Future History, whatever: it's mapped out from the beginning, or from the end, and there's nothing you or I or anyone can do to alter it. Everything we do – whether we jump forward or back – is accounted for. We're *meant* to do it. And if you were meant to use the wormhole and become a great leader, or even the Majestrix himself, History would already have recorded it.'

And there was Quantax, right on cue. He burst from the mist, grabbed Nightbeat by the throat and slashed his stomach open. The mindpurge device fell out and slid towards the wormhole.

Nightbeat and Quantax tumbled down the altar steps, rolled across the floor and fell over the precipice.

Outside, Centurion wondered how he was still alive. How could someone like him – so fragile, so human – withstand any more pain?

'A certain type of robot,' said Jolup, sinking his boot into Centurion's ribs, 'would beg you to fight back. A certain type of robot would wring his hands and pontificate about honour, about the quality of combat. Not me. I'm *glad* you can't fight back.'

Centurion rolled onto his belly, certain that he'd left an important clump of innards sizzling on the ground. With a reaction spasm reserved for birth or death, he grabbed Jolup's sweeping leg and knocked his attacker to the ground. Now all it took was a scramble upright, the recovery of his shotgun, a well-placed kill shot and... and... and stop.

He couldn't move.

He was paralysed.

When Jolup grabbed his neck and hoisted him to eye-level it all became tearfully clear. There were his legs, criss-crossing each other on the ground as if marking buried treasure. Before he could properly assimilate the blast-waves of shock, the ground opened up and swallowed all evidence.

'I'm sorry,' said Jolup, stepping backwards to avoid the chasm. 'I'm trying not to laugh, I really am.' He held Centurion over the lava and began unfurling his fingers. 'Did you say something, Autobot? Did you say you wanted to go home?'

'If I were you,' said Optimus Prime, standing between Astrotrain and Thundercracker. 'I'd consider his request very carefully, and then put him down on solid ground.'

Jolup craned his neck and saw three new arrivals, one of whom looked unnervingly like Sevax. All of them had their weapons raised, but the big guy at the front, with glass on his chest and a mouthplate, was threatening him directly.

‘I don’t know whether you’re a Decepticon or a Quintesson,’ continued Prime, ‘but if you kill that robot, I swear you’ll be the next to die.’

Jolup gave his most innocent expression as he looked between Prime and Centurion. ‘Kill this robot? I *can’t* kill him. You see...’ He relaxed his grip. ‘...He’s already dead.’

Centurion’s body exploded on contact. Lava smeared the walls of the crevasse as Optimus roared his disbelief.

Before the revenge shots could knock him off balance, Jolup jumped over the precipice, transformed into jet mode and re-emerged half a mile nearer the temple.

‘He’s yours, Astrotrain,’ said Optimus, and turned to Thundercracker. ‘Find Nightbeat and ask him to send you home. Tell him I’ll be along shortly.’

Sevax knew that something was wrong – he could tell by the grin on Hound’s face (people didn’t usually smile when one of their hands had been ripped off). Then he felt the gun against his ribcage.

A plasmabolt sliced through his stomach, leaving a gaping exit wound. He sank to his knees and looked up for the killshot, but it didn’t come: the Autobot had just been decapitated by a low-flying wingtip.

Jolup transformed and pulled Sevax to his feet. ‘By Gnaw’s Teeth! If you spent less time memorising the Old Texts and more time training in the Sharkpit, you wouldn’t get into these scrapes. Patch yourself up while I get Ryknia. We’re leaving.’

Nightbeat hung from Quantax’s waist as the Quintesson tried to climb up the wall of the crevasse and onto the temple floor. He looked down (the lava was obscured by whitened smoke) and then up (the sky above was caked with ash and brimstone). They got it all wrong, he decided: Hell is above us, Heaven below.

Quantax hoisted his leg onto the temple floor and swung the rest of his body up so forcefully that Nightbeat came loose. He pushed his fingers into the walls of the crevasse, hoping to bury his entire hands. Through the smoke, he saw Quantax stretch to his full height. In an ideal world, he decided, this would be the moment when Optimus arrives and saves the day, but twice in one week was pushing it.

Quantax smiled – and then his chest exploded. The blast hit him from behind and emerged from under his chin like a blossoming firework. The second shot knocked him over the precipice, and he screamed on the way down.

Nightbeat scrambled onto solid ground expecting Optimus to lean forward with an outstretched hand. Instead, he saw Ryknia, Sevax and Jolup huddling around a semi-conscious Trailbreaker, having forced him to open fire on their leader. The Quintecons flinched when they realised they’d been seen and made a dash for the wormhole.

Nightbeat beat them to it. Outlined by froth and radium fizz, he blocked the portal and held out a steady hand. ‘This isn’t going to work,’ he said feebly, and realised that the Quintessons had no intention of stopping.

‘Think of a common point in time!’ shouted Sevax, leaping over pews. ‘Think of the operation that put us in these bodies!’

Nightbeat looked about in vain for a weapon and saw the mindpurge device, upturned but intact. It jumped about in his fingers, refusing to stay still. He fell onto his haunches, activated remote sweep and fired. Three lightning bolts jumped from the black box and found their targets instantly.

The Quintecons did not notice the energy threads lancing into their foreheads or feel the virus floss their brains; they just kept on running. With each step they lost more memory: short-term mnemonic files were deleted, personal history was smudged and recent events undid themselves. Suddenly, the last year of their lives was lost behind an impenetrable wall of electronically induced amnesia. By the time they crashed past Nightbeat into January 1986, Sevax, Ryknia and Jolup were motivated only by the will to survive.

The wormhole shuddered at their penetration and sank more energy into its surroundings. A shell-shocked Nightbeat stood up, squinted through the mist, and saw Thundercracker screaming towards him in aerial mode. He leapt clear, fumbled with the mindpurge, felt warm air against his face, and watched a

javelin of deep-coded light tear through the wormhole, reaching out for the Decepticon. Had it found its target? He didn't know.

The mindpurge began to overheat, and Nightbeat wondered whether it was even working.

'Nightbeat!' Optimus appeared at the door and ran towards the altar. 'What happens now?'

'Clear your mind. Let me do all the thinking. I'm going to remember the Ark as it was on my last visit.' With the mindpurge in his left hand and Prime's mighty paw in his right, Nightbeat closed his eyes. For a moment he thought he heard laserfire in 1986, but the sound soon faded.

Suddenly, there it was: the Ark; the destination point; the flashback made flesh.

They stepped through. Both looked back for different reasons and saw the same thing: a haze of commingling temporal energies. 2013 was reduced to memory prints and sense impressions, a vague suggestion of shape and form. The portal's energies had flowed into 1984, where they crept along the ceiling and wrapped themselves around cones of rock, leaving fingerprints on monitor screens and worming their way into Teletran One.

Mount St Hilary began to shake, feeding off the same tremors that were disassembling the Acid Wastes.

'Okay, Optimus,' said Nightbeat, thumping the mindpurge device with his palm to get it working again. 'This may sound trite, but we don't have much time. I want you to... Optimus! Are you listening to me?'

'Hmm? Yes. I'm just...' Optimus gestured at the deactivated robots littering the floor. 'I'm just taking it all in.' He got down on one knee and took Prowl's hand. The wormhole light gave shape to a mouth that had been set in stone for four million years. 'If you get the chance, Nightbeat, tell Prowl I'm sorry I missed him.'

Nightbeat thought of quarantine and skeletons and bruise-blue optics. 'I promise,' he said, and held out the mindpurge.

The volcano rumbled and belched, nauseated by the glue of a wormhole coming unstuck. Nightbeat relaxed his arm.

'I've been thinking, Optimus. I've never pretended any of this is fair: the time jumping, the abduction, the way we used you to win our war. But there is something I can do to make amends: I can let you keep your memories. Perhaps then... I don't know. Perhaps then you can find a way to cheat death.'

Optimus stood up. 'At one point, not so long ago, I'd have snatched that box from your hand and crushed it. I'd have done anything to preserve the knowledge of my death. I planned to sidestep the inevitable by creating a facsimile construct to take my place in 1987, and when the end came, when this Ethan Zachary character shut me down, it wouldn't be me lying in pieces, it would be a fake. I thought I could cheat death.'

'You still can! It would *work*, Optimus. You and Wheeljack could build some sort of clone that would – that would...'

'But then I thought no, that's not how this works out. Why should I be the one to slip the net when millions of my fellow Autobots are dead? They were never given a choice or a second chance: why should I? My future will be played out the only way it can. We already know how this is going to end.'

'But you've seen the future! Save your memories!'

'Like I said, there was a time when I'd have done anything to remember. But now, having seen the future, having *lived* it... I'd do anything to forget.'

Optimus took Nightbeat's hand and adjusted the mindpurge so that the lens faced his forehead. 'Let's get this over with.'

'There's something else, Optimus. Something I meant to tell you. 1987 is not the end. Not quite. Ethan Zachary preserves your personality on a magnetic disc, and the following year we build a new body into which your old character codes are programmed. It's not really you, not in the purest sense, but it's an echo. In a manner of speaking, you live on.'

Optimus scooped a rifle from the floor and handed it over. 'You'll need this. Don't stop until I'm off-line.'

Nightbeat aimed the mindpurge and looked away. 'I won't forget you.'

'I wish I could say the same.'

Nightbeat fired. The beam did not need to travel far, just a jagged hop from nub to cerebellum. As the black box slipped from his fingers, he saw the first flickers of bewilderment in Prime's eyes. He did not

see the mindpurge bounce against the floor and cast its beam deep into a nearby computer port; he did not hear the infinitesimal chatter of stealth programming as the Ark's memory banks were butchered and re-written: the data on the Great War was instantly erased, and the Decepticons suddenly became as eligible for repair as the Autobots.

Optimus blinked at the gun in Nightbeat's hand and went to speak.

Nightbeat opened fire, ripping Prime's chest apart and hammering him to the floor. His optics blurred to black...

...and Mount St Hilary erupted.

The Ark shivered against the blast, realigning millennia of dust-crusting hardware. Somewhere deep inside Teletran's wormhole-soaked intestinal tracts a severed link was reconnected, and pinpricks of light appeared throughout the craft. Outside, search beacons explored the volcano's interior.

Nightbeat arranged Optimus' body as he had found it: half-hugging Megatron. There was nothing else to be done. Thanks to him, events were playing out as they should. He tiptoed between the corpses thinking about the caprices of time. How could something so inflexible give the impression of flexibility? How could something appear to bend and accommodate without ever conceding a single alteration?

He watched the Ark coming to life all around him and turned to the wormhole, ready to leap.

But 2013 had boiled away. In its place was a plate of seething red and white, a temporal epicentre eager to flay anything that crossed the line. Nothing could withstand its death-touch, its rage and vigour.

*I can't stay here, he thought. I know how this ends, and it doesn't happen; it simply doesn't happen.*

Monitor screens flared up as Aunty came on-line and despatched a sensor drone to collect data on the planet's indigenous life forms. Nightbeat watched the copper-coloured tripod rocket towards the Oregon State highway.

With Astrotrain in shuttle mode, Red Alert and the others had fled the celestial temple and found a safe vantage point almost fifty miles away, on the outskirts of Yuss. The Decepticon was hiding inside the shell of a building, pressing his hand against his head and waiting for a call from Soundwave. Red Alert was watching the storm through his scope visor and counting down to the end.

It was, he had decided, like watching the death of a star: an ecosystem hurtling towards blackout, sucking itself dry and collapsing under the pressure. Lightning shimmered over a gas cloud that swirled on its axis and absorbed the lava tides. He could barely see the plateau now – or the Acid Wastes, for that matter.

The wormhole had shrunk but its influence had spread. The barren cadmium plains running from J'nsik to Wannus were already malleable after centuries of deep-soak and star-burn. They had been stained to the marrow by Underbase residue and nuke stew and Primus knew what else... He didn't like to think what the wormhole would do in the long-term.

'Red Alert?'

'What?'

'Soundwave says the last Trident has just been shot down over the Rust Sea. We've won.'

'Right now, Astrotrain, I don't care.'

<< *Commencing revival procedures* >>

Why was there never enough time?

Nightbeat raced back onto the bridge as maintenance drones scooped blunt bodies off the floor. He closed his dangling chest-plate, careful not to shed any loose circuitry, and dodged the repair beams as they scoured the floor for debris. Prowl's body was winched into the air and steadied by anti-grav beams; a guidance grid was tattooed onto his torso and micro-lasers moved in, fusing and welding, spreading membranes of wet metal.

In his haste to get clear, Nightbeat had already knocked Sunstreaker's body away from a repair beam. He'd had to drag the golden Autobot back into the wayward spotlight, accidentally bringing him back on-line in the process. Sunstreaker was too groggy to process what was happening, but it was nevertheless an unpleasant close shave.

New-look secondary modes were flashing onto an overhead screen as he fled to a corner and patched into Aunty. Projected flight paths carved the monitor screen into segments, and alongside his own reflection

he saw Optimus being hoisted into the eves. Damage so recently sustained was being patched and patted, as was meant to be.

He shut down the screen, took one last look at himself, and faced the wormhole. Not much of a destiny, he thought, edging towards the brightness, but it was the only one he had. The portal reached out with spindly arms and poked heat in his eyes.

The blindness came instantly. His optics boiled away and dripped from their sockets. For the first few seconds, as the rush of heat devoured his sensornets, he was mentally and physically paralysed. But the agony needed comprehension to exist, and as shock unlocked his flaming joints one by one he thought, 'I am the living dead, held upright by force of pain alone.'

He staggered through the portal and tried to shut the wormhole down behind him, unaware that it was already closing. Thought patterns melted away as quickly as the steel skin on his fingers, face and chest, and with an odd sense of relief he realised he was on fire. He transformed into his vehicular mode (now little more than a rust-frame stuffed with gas and glycerine) and accelerated, not realising that his rubber-less wheels had already left the ground.

The wormhole sealed itself up, but left one last parting message: an explosion that sprang so wide, so high, that it seemed Cybertron would once again be knocked from orbit.

Over the next few hours, the explosion would fade; they always did. The lightning would cease and the mists would lift to reveal a pink plain patterned with crushed ash and blast marks. Search teams wrapped in heat-resistant alloys would prod the gelatinous surface and leave boot marks in the dirt. Detonation circles would be counted and measured like rings on a tree trunk. The sky would regress in shade from black to blue to green to yellow, and onlookers would finally see stars.

And at this point a lone figure with limbs like paper and a mouthful of cinders would stagger from a crater where a temple used to be. His shorthand movements, so soft and small, would leave liquorice rings in the air, and he would manage only a few awkward steps.

Then he would stop, look up, and smile.

A sad smile; a proud smile.

'It is the hardest task of all to face the lack of  
cosmic support for what we care about.'

**Allan Bloom**

'Listed Building: No Entry'

**Sign on cordoned remains of Maccadam's Old Oil House,  
2 January 2013**

'Let me whisper my last goodbyes /  
I know – It's SERIOUS'

**'Girlfriend in a Coma'  
Morrissey**



EPILOGUE

*All My Bastard Children*

Delphi slumped like rotten fruit, melting at the edges and oxidising in the Canyon sun.

Pickup teams dragged Quintesson bodies outside, away from the pools of oil and the stale smoke on the ceilings. The corpses left fragments on the floor as they were wheelbarrowed towards daylight.

Thoo Transformers who had escaped Kledji lined up outside the science lab and shuffled towards a compulsory medical. Wheeljack and Sygnet checked necks, administered energon boosts and made notes. Occasionally, a Grade A would break the silence by asking direct questions: *What did they put in my neck?* or *Why can't I transform?* or *Can I be cured?* Wheeljack would answer the first two with a burst of jargon; the third he would deflect by reaching for a new scalpel or pretending to be surprised by stats on a screen.

Outside, Autobots and Decepticons squinted and sighed and prodded the ground, looking for anyone who could be saved. In-between their duties, in-between the stoop and haul of clear up and body-search, they checked their audio-trenches for damage. Cybertronian fatalities were grouped by allegiance and laid out in the sun, ready for identification. Some of the dead were nothing more than a mangled spinal strut, a faceplate, a skullcap. Those that were still functional were delivered to Delphi's door, where Ratchet and Fulcrum stood like sentries. The doctors probed hairline scars and body-punctures with messianic concern. Once they had given a diagnosis, the patient was stretchered to the medi-vault.

On higher ground, Throwback and Chromedome dragged Bluestreak's body away from what was left of the Ark. Curled at the bottom of its own titanic crater, the spacecraft was essentially a vortex of burnt metal. It had become an installation: a bolt of modern art, an apology of waste metal bent out of shape by nuke-heat and flash-burn.

'Are you sure this is him?' asked Chromedome, sliding his hands under a piece of frazzled metal. 'Because Cloudraker will hit the roof if we drag another chair into the medilab.'

'It's him all right,' said Throwback, pointing to a mouth and nose among the parietal damage. 'You know, sometimes I wonder what it takes to kill us. Bluestreak's been flayed alive and yet he'll still pull through. What did we do to deserve such unnatural endurance?'

They watched a Decepticon space shuttle fly overhead. Astrotrain softened his engines, slipped into his train configuration, and chugged to a halt on the Canyon floor. Medical teams converged around the disembarkation ramp as it slapped the ground.

'Here we go,' said Chromedome as Ratchet broke the ring of onlookers and cleared space. Something thin was pulled from Astrotrain's carriage. 'Get ready for the hero's welcome.'

Throwback put his hand to his mouth. 'Something's wrong. I think... I think that's Nightbeat.'

The body being carried towards Delphi made Bluestreak look as new as the day he Matrixed.

Perceptor wandered through Delphi, letting his optics adjust to the indoor light. He nodded to Sygnet, who was pressing an energon swab against the last of the Kledji escapees. The floor was sprinkled with flakes of red paint that crunched like autumn leaves underfoot. He realised why so many of the Decepticons outside looked as if they'd been splattered with blood.

He turned into a side corridor, where Red Alert and Hosehead were sitting opposite the medivault. He sat down beside them and attuned himself to the pulse and heartbeat of distended time, that peculiar synthesis of hope and grief that quietens every waiting room.

'How is he?'

'We did our best,' said Red Alert, staring at the vault door. 'You didn't *see* it – it was a wasteland. We had to wait until the search teams arrived, and by then... I don't know. I think he's going to die, Perceptor.'

'Cloudraker and Fulcrum are seeing to him now,' added Hosehead. 'He's been tranq'd and slabbed. They're looking for his sparkline.'

'They can't even find a sparkline?' Perceptor stared at the ceiling. 'I never imagined that the wormhole's evopeak would manifest itself so violently. He should never have gone in.'

'You make it sound like he had a choice,' said Red Alert. 'He *had* to go inside the temple; he *had* to take Prime back. I just have his image of him,' he sighed, trying to sculpt the memory with his hands. 'He was standing by himself, staring at the sky before the Quintessons attacked. He knew what would happen. He knew.'

The vault door swung open and Cloudraker ran off down the corridor, smoke rising from his fingers. Before the door closed, Perceptor glimpsed Nightbeat's body writhing on a circuit slab. Fulcrum was wielding jump leads, waiting for an opportunity to pounce.

Then Cloudraker came back down the corridor, Ratchet in tow.

'Who's with him?' the doctor demanded, knocking at the vault door.

'Just Fulcrum,' said Perceptor, standing up. 'He's having some kind of seizure.'

'Dammit!' Ratchet slipped inside and the door once again swung closed. All Perceptor could see this time was Prowl, serene in his q-pod, completing his millionth spin.

Hosehead leant close to Red Alert. 'What were his last words? Optimus Prime's, I mean.'

'I have no idea. I didn't see him arrive or leave. I was being beaten to death by some Decepticon/Quintesson hybrid.'

'“One day an Autobot shall rise from our ranks,”’ said Perceptor, “And light our darkest hour.” He said that to me before he boarded Astrotrain.’ He gave a weak smile. 'Yes, I thought it sounded familiar too.'

'It makes you think, though,' said Hosehead. 'What if Unicron's assault in 2006 wasn't our darkest hour? I mean, look what we just come through. What else lies ahead?'

'I think our darkest hour is the next one,' said Red Alert. 'It will always be the next one.'

'We can't afford to think like that,' said Perceptor. 'We still have the Alliance. Maybe this is the beginning of the end. Maybe something good has...’ His words faded as he looked up. Soundwave had appeared at the end of the corridor and was obviously waiting for a gap in the conversation.

'Perceptor,' he said, 'I need to speak with you in private.'

Perceptor led him into a side room and quietly closed the door. 'What is it?'

'We're leaving.'

'I see. Where will you go?'

Soundwave paused only for a second, weighing up the situation. 'The Quintesson fortress. It will serve as a base of operations for the time being.'

‘What about the casualties? The medivault is full of Decep— full of your men.’

‘I’ve prepared ships to ferry our wounded.’

‘Why go now? It seems an inappropriate time.’

‘You should be grateful we’re not draining precious resources.’ He did not wait for a response. ‘I’ve spoken to Sygnet and Wheeljack. They have enough information to create a counter-Inhibitor Chip that can be implanted in the escapees. It will transmit a blocking frequency and stave off paralysis.’

‘A counter-chip could take weeks to prepare. What happens in the meantime?’

‘I gather that Mirage is loading your troops into stasis pods as we speak. Onslaught is recommending voluntary shutdown to my men. My Decepticons.’

‘And then it’s off to the Fortress,’ Perceptor smiled humourlessly. ‘At least you found yourself a brand new base.’

‘I suggest you do the same.’ Soundwave moved towards the door. ‘Leave Delphi as soon as possible.’

‘Is that a threat or a warning?’

‘Advice. Friendly advice.’

‘Wait! You can’t just up and leave. What about the Alliance?’

Soundwave hovered in the doorway. ‘I... cannot comment. If Galvatron is still alive, the decision rests with him.’

‘But if Galvatron’s dead, and you are in command...’

‘Then our war is over.’

The medivault door swung open. Ratchet’s arms hung limply by his sides. Oil dripped down his chest.

‘Nightbeat’s dead.’

Wheeljack brushed his fingers across a flatbed sensor-screen and made alterations to the Inhibitor print. Every so often he fumbled below the desk to snuff a spark-fire in his thigh. His wounds could wait: there was work to be done. As he worked he chatted to Sygnet, who was tidying up in the background.

‘No, it’s a shame about the Ark. The old bird’s been good to us: blasting paths through asteroid fields, being wedged under a volcano for four million years, rock-hopping from Cybertron to Earth to Cybertron... I’ll miss it.’

Sygnet muttered something into the recharge belt he was folding up.

‘Anyway,’ Wheeljack continued. ‘I suppose it’ll be nice to move on.’ He tapped the sensorscreen enthusiastically. ‘Throw some new designs together, build a better starship. I’ve always thought “The Axalon” had a nice ring to it. What do you think?’

‘Yeah. Whatever.’

‘But first things first. If these alternations work out we should have our Anti-Inhibitor prototype ready within two weeks. Manufacturing could prove a problem, but I’m sure we’ll work something out, right? Maybe some duodurillium mould or reflexive microwiring.’ He pushed harder on the sensorscreen as a touch-pad refused to react. ‘Pass me a thermal screwdriver, will you?’ His arm hung in mid-air. ‘Sygnet?’

He turned to see Sygnet walking into the corridor and ran after him.

‘Where are you going?’

‘Soundwave called us in. Heard it on Internal. We’re heading back to Polyhex.’

‘You’re re-joining the Decepticons?!’

‘Re-joining? I never left. Hey, it was you that asked me to tag along, not the other way around. I’m sorry. This was an alliance of convenience.’

Wheeljack held up his hands and shook his head. ‘Don’t give me that. Don’t *insult* me. These things are never just about convenience: you wanted to be an Autobot again. Admit it!’

Sygnet shrugged. ‘Maybe I did. When you’re fighting an alien invasion you gotta ask yourself which side you’d rather have watching your back.’

‘Autobot, Decepticon, Autobot, Decepticon. Do you get your kicks playing defector?’

‘I’ve only defected once, and that was four million years ago, when I became a Decepticon. Nothing’s changed. I’m still your enemy.’

‘But that’s just it! You... you’re not my enemy. I can’t see you waste the rest of your life.’

‘The Decepticons have given me authority, rank, respect. I have a workshop, tools, and responsibilities, just like you. On the whole they’ve treated me well, and that’s what you can’t bear to hear.’

‘If you want to squander your talents working for murderers, fine. But I hope you realise that they’re exploiting you. They’re using your weapons to kill.’

‘And what, exactly, do the Autobots do with the weapons you design for them?’

‘Look... stay here. The Autobots need someone like you.’

‘They already have someone like me.’ Sygnet held out his hand. ‘Come on, Wheeljack. Isn’t this the part where you tell me that you respect my decision and promise me a place in the Autobot army should I ever change my mind?’

Wheeljack stared at the outstretched hand, turned and walked away.

Sygnet padded outside. The Canyons were empty. The Quintessons had been raked into pits and covered in scrap. The Decepticons had gone. He transformed and flew after his comrades.

Perceptor knocked on the medibay door and waited. He had taken Soundwave’s ‘friendly advice’: all around him, Delphi was being undone. The corridors themselves were being dissected, tapped free like double-glazing and propped against a haggard cliff-face. There was nothing much left downstairs: a well-trodden floor, some doorframes and a hangar containing Omega Supreme’s corpse. The teleportal had been flat-packed and loaded onto the Autosshuttle waiting outside.

He stepped inside the medi-vault and pressed himself against burnt-out life-support machines so that Ratchet could close the door. He could see why the medic was so eager to conceal the bodies: it was a matter not of security, but morale. How could anyone concentrate if they could see the deactivation tables, the casualty checklists, the off-line reports?

The newest casualties had been slabbed on multi-level incubators and tethered to a communal drip-feed. Plugged in and pacified, stabilised by overload, they suckled energon in a codeine fog. Unlike Nightbeat, their deaths would interrupt no one: only a muffled ammeter would mark their passing.

Like a rubbish dump sculpted into order, things seemed neat and intact – but close inspection revealed the chaos beneath the surface. Each patch of white was off-white; each gleaming block of medical equipment was stained by weak lubricant; every tray of surgical instruments hid a trough filled with rust-blades and handprints. Everything had the weight and shine of overuse: the laser scalpel blacked at the tip; the arc welder rippled with old grip; resuscitators scuffed at the edges. They were all scrubbed, maintained, and sterilised, but they were gradually losing shape, eroded by friendly friction and too many hands. And Perceptor realised, suddenly, that Ratchet and Cloudraker had that accumulative weight, that ancient shine. They moved like fleshly ghosts among the dead and dying.

‘You wanted to see me,’ said Ratchet.

‘Yes. I’m sorry to interrupt. We’re looking to head off at dawn, once the ceremony is over. I just wanted to give you advance warning.’

‘Yeah. Yeah, thanks... Where are we going again?’

‘I thought we would head for the Manganese Mountains. Fortress Maximus’ old base is too small, but the old asylum is there, inside Edeus. It can be converted.’

Ratchet looked up, thinking he’d misheard. ‘The prison camp where these guys escaped from?’

‘I know what you’re going to say. I’m still ruminating on the moral issues myself.’ Perceptor moved to the back of the room and placed his hands on Prowl’s quarantine pod. ‘It’s ironic. I keep wondering what Prowl would do in this situation.’

‘Why is that ironic?’

‘Because it’s this situation, or one much like it, that killed him... What am I saying? He’s not dead yet.’

‘Unfortunately, you’re saying what everyone knows, deep down. The poor guy isn’t going to make it.’

‘You sound remarkably resigned to the fact.’

‘Look around you, Perceptor. I have more pressing concerns.’ Ratchet rubbed his optics, re-setting the focus. ‘I’m sorry. I just know that half these guys aren’t going to leave this room alive.’

‘I don’t understand. I’m no medic, but I’ve seen far worse casualties in the past. Are their injuries really that bad?’

‘No! They’re not! That’s what makes this so frustrating! We’re running out of supplies. We burnt the last resus unit trying to save Nightbeat, and now I’ve run out of slabs.’ Ratchet gestured to the stacks of escapees. ‘Why do you think these guys are lying around?’

‘I’m aware of the situation. Wheeljack assures me that the Anti-Inhibitor chips will halt their deterioration.’

‘And how is Wheeljack going to manufacture this miracle cure? I barely have enough duodurillium to patch up his leg wound! Then there’s the equipment needed to implant the chips.’ He held up a bent syringe. ‘This wouldn’t penetrate copper.’

‘Why not just freeze them in stasis?’

‘Do you know how many Autobots burn out while in stasis? Their neural circuitry gobbles itself up and you end up thawing dead bodies. Having said that...’

‘Yes?’

‘Some have better chances of survival than others.’ Ratchet squatted beside an embryonic off-liner. ‘Grapple here is in pretty good shape, comparatively speaking. One could argue that he’s more deserving of a pod than, say, Hoist, who’s been put into stasis but may never recover from his injuries.’

‘You’d pick and choose who lives and dies?’

‘I’d make detached, rational decisions based on severity of injuries and available medical equipment. Believe me, I don’t want to start playing God, but I do have a responsibility to save as many lives as possible. And to do that I have to start looking at things dispassionately. Logically.’ He straightened up and looked closely at Prowl’s half-eaten face. ‘Let’s face it, this q-pod could be preserving someone’s life instead of delaying someone’s death.’

Perceptor left the room and stood in the stripped-bare corridor. He imagined Ratchet plotting Gantt charts and For/Against columns, rolling dice, closing his eyes and sticking pins in pods.

The fire slimmed to a flame and blew itself out. Only a forlorn stream of smoke marked the transition, stretching skyward and losing shape to the wind. Without colour, without troubled amber contours and a yellowed belly, Darkmount was just another blacked-out building; another relic pressing shadows into craters and marking dead history.

Soundwave did not mourn its passing.

He watched the fire burn out from a balcony high on the west side of the Quintesson Fortress. Even with an Ark-sized crater in its side, the new base was far bigger than Darkmount. Admittedly, the name needed to be changed. Perhaps ‘Xerxes’, in honour of the stadium in Tarn where Megatron had first spoken to him of the Decepticons. Yes, Xerxes – it had a nice ring to it.

He stepped back inside, out of the moonlight, and followed his reflection down mirrored stairways, deep in thought. Ten minutes ago he’d heard that Galvatron was alive and heading back to Cybertron. He had been disappointed. Disappointed and angry.

He walked into Ward B, a cavern of dark chrome and subzero temperatures where hundreds of empty circuit slabs and personal healthcare suites ran like railway tracks across parquets of infinite shine. Banks of pristine hardware glistened under ultraviolet strip-lights; monitors simmered behind polish and screen-gleam; unused life-supports breathed a low glow across fields of vacant stasis pods. A refrigerated tunnel led to the much larger Ward A, which was only half full.

Pounce, Wingspan and a dozen others moved between the thigh-high beds taking notes, adjusting apparatus and administering energon jabs. A glass-plated anteroom housed red-flecked ex-prisoners, Grades A to D, and it was there that Soundwave headed. Fulcrum met him in the doorway, clamped the duodurillium syringe to his tool-belt and gave a jagged salute.

‘At ease, Fulcrum. Report.’

‘I’m injecting Sygnet’s Anti-Inhibitor chip, commander. He found supplies of the original chip in the basement cells, which circumvented the need for a prototype being built from scratch. It was a simple matter of modification.’ Fulcrum tapped a steel satchel that was resting on his thigh. ‘This batch alone will see that every escapee is, er...’

‘Cured.’

‘Yes and no. The Anti-Inhibitor should reverse neural decay and unlock paralysis, but we have no idea what the side effects will be.’

‘Irrelevant,’ said Soundwave. ‘They either deal with it or they don’t. Do you have anything else to report?’

Fulcrum gestured across the ward, where Pounce was sealing up Scourge’s chest plate. ‘Scourge is just about to come back on line. The rest of High Command will soon be operational again.’

Scourge sat up on his circuit slab, rubbed his head and looked around. ‘What date is it?’

‘Date?’ Soundwave looked at his chronometer. ‘3 January 2013.’

Scourge visibly relaxed. ‘We made it, then.’

‘Correction, Scourge: you made it. Welcome back on-line.’

‘I mean the Quintessons. The invasion’s over. The wormhole’s been sealed.’

‘How did you—?’ But Soundwave doubled up in pain before he could finish. He dropped to one knee and cradled his stomach.

‘Commander!’ cried Fulcrum. ‘Are you alright?’

Energy was leaking out of Soundwave’s eyes and building up behind his visor. He batted away Fulcrum’s hand and collapsed onto the floor, whimpering to himself. He’d never felt such pain before. His oilstream started to boil and his fuel pump struggled to re-divert energon to a web of porous circuitry that was scabbing over his chest plate. His hands began to glow red as he clawed at his chest.

Something inside was trying to get out.

‘He’s going into morph spasm!’ yelled Pounce, pulling Scourge out of harm’s way: it was dangerous to interfere with morphbirth; even placing a hand on the host’s shoulder could interfere with the Channelling and lead to deformities in the protoform. All they could do was watch.

Soundwave sprang to his feet as if animated by puppeteer’s string. Oil was dribbling from his joints, from his wrists and waist and knees. He was an old robot, only a few full-cycles away from circuitburn, and his ageing shell was too fragile to withstand the scathing rigours of liquid labour.

The first bubbles appeared on his chest, ripe and rosy, and he screamed – in terror more than pain. He’d never given birth before (and hadn’t expected to – you were usually identified as a Lifer early on); it felt as if two people were sharing his body-space; as if twice the mass had been crammed into one neuronet, one CPU. His chest began to bulge as the pressure became too much. A thousand micro-pumps forced a mercurial cocktail of steel and *sentio metallico* from sub-surface reservoirs into the open air. The silvery liquid curled and congealed as it hit the floor.

‘Something’s wrong,’ said Fulcrum. ‘It’s not stopping!’

Something important had burst inside Soundwave’s chest; some inner tear or rupture had unleashed a flood. The *sentio metallico* that spilt from gaping pores had a life of its own – literally. As it gushed onto the floor it assumed pre-determined qualities, its unique Vorcode having been dictated subconsciously by the host, who in turn had been influenced by subtle fluctuations in the sparkline. Once enough liquid had escaped Soundwave’s chest – enough to make six sets of morph-triplets – the tide was stemmed and the circuitry re-sealed.

Fulcrum swung partitions into place around Soundwave and bathed the area in ultraviolet light. At this dangerous, post-natal stage, before the Encoding, the protoform could still be influenced by external factors. Before the Primal template was etched and formatted it was still vulnerable to such birth defects as premature cooling and joint-freeze.

The pool of liquid began to take shape, gathering itself in at the hem and spiralling upwards into a broad column.

Scourge, Fulcrum and Pounce stared, open-mouthed, at the sight of spontaneous biomorphic creation. Soundwave just curled into a ball and watched through his oil-smeared visor. What had he created that was so large, so ungainly? Another multi-modar like Sixshot or Quickswitch? An entire combining team?

The protoform smoothed itself into a large sphere and hovered in mid-air as the Encoding began. A bright yellow ring of pure Matrix energy sprung up from the ground and swept across its surface, scraping details onto the soft putty.

The Decepticons stared at the newborn, aghast at its deformities. It wasn’t like other Transformers. Instead of legs and arms and shoulders, it had an ovoid bodyshell, biomechanical tentacles, and five dark, frowning faces.

‘Get me a gun,’ whispered Soundwave, climbing to his feet.

Sygnal checked the corridor one last time before slumping in front of the keyboard. His head felt lopsided and translucent, and when he plugged the transfer cable into his cerebral plate he half expected his brain module to explode. Loyalty, betrayal, deceit – they damaged you inside, not out. He’d known that for four million years.

As he bypassed the Quintesson password request, wiped the file named ‘Old Texts’ (who wanted to know the secrets of an extinct race?) and accessed the download facility, he thought about Wheeljack’s parting words. He replayed their argument with alternate endings, adding the things he could have said, and then plugged the other end of the transfer cable in place. Time to let it all out.

He downloaded everything he had stolen in a rush of super-compressed data and info-flow. Dense blocks of coded text scrolled up the screen, throwing lime light around the darkened room. The walls were full of Autobot secrets as Delphi’s entire database was sucked from his mem-files and stored onto the Quintesson computer: force statistics, medical records, personal files, base locations, covert projects, weapon design, trade routes, vehicle schematics and blueprints for new troops.

He tore the transfer cable loose and tapped his forehead shut, feeling as if he’d dumped ten lifetimes’ worth of memory. A single cursor kept rhythm with his fuel pump and the voice in his head: Wheeljack’s voice, telling him to stay. How different would their conversation have been if Wheeljack had known the truth: that he’d copied every byte of data from Delphi’s motherboard the moment he’d been left alone in the lab.

He stared at the cursor, shook his head and tapped the keyboard. Suddenly, Fulcrum filled the doorframe. The surgeon folded his arms and nodded at the computer screen.

‘I think it’s time that you and I had a little chat,’ he said. The word ‘Deleted’ flashed quietly against his chest plate.

Mounted on a tripod fashioned from the bones of the Ark, the giant incinerator orb bubbled with fuel-dregs siphoned from dead Autobots. As highest-ranking officer and therefore – in Creationist genealogy – closest to the Matrix, Perceptor opened the Rites of Departure by lighting the spark. Harsh blue flames settled on the blubber-thick meniscus and spread a crackling glow around the funeral pyre.

Perceptor’s eulogy was short (how could you talk about the violent deaths of hundreds of Autobots in anything other than general terms?), but coached in layman’s language. Since assuming leadership, he had reprogrammed his speech circuitry and widened vocab routes. As a scientist, he had relied on language that was precise and expedient, but that way of speaking sounded impersonal now. He was talking about people’s lives, not molecular fission or fossil fuels.

As ‘all are one’ rang hollow on the pre-dawn air, the Autobots raised their arms and fired at the sky. Their laserbolts faded before they reached the funeral barge, loaded with bodies, which would eventually puncture the planet’s atmosphere and fall into a pre-programmed collision course with Alpha Centauri. Every Autobot had the capacity to work out – to the nearest millisecond – the projected point of impact, the moment when a tiny solar flare would mark total meltdown. Not one made the calculation.

The mourners filtered back inside Delphi to lose themselves in petty tasks. Only Wheeljack, Ratchet, Mirage and Hound remained by the flickering pyre.

‘Makes you think, doesn’t it,’ said Hound eventually, rubbing the joints in his neck. ‘About the war, I mean. Perhaps we’ve fought our last battle.’

‘We’ve thought that in the past,’ Wheeljack sighed. ‘After Klo. After Hydrus 4. Even 2006 seemed to draw a line under things.’ He sat down, and beckoned the others to do the same.

‘No, this feels different,’ said Mirage. ‘Population-wise, our race is at an all-time low. We’ve barely enough energy to function, let alone fight. And the Alliance... I don’t know, but it seems to be holding.’

‘Yeah, but for how long?’

‘Come on Wheels, at least give me the luxury of saying “what if?” What if Galvatron agrees to talks? What if the four of us formed a negotiation team and thrashed things out on mutual territory? How long before we grant the Decepticons amnesty and start over? How long before the name “Decepticon” ceases to exist, and we call go back to being Autobots, or just plain Cybertronians?’

‘What about the new smelting pool in Polyhex? That doesn’t bode well for the future, does it?’

‘The Quintessons built it. We could use it to melt down our weapons.’

Ratchet lay down and tucked his hands behind his head. ‘It’s a pipe dream, Mirage. It’s not going to happen. What does the Primal Pentateuch say? We were created as a last line of defence...’

‘I’m tired of defending,’ said Hound. ‘And I’m tired of attacking. Look at that sky.’ The first breath of daylight was smudging the horizon. ‘Look at us sitting here, talking. When was the last time we *talked*?’

Mirage stared into the incinerator’s whitened core. ‘It’s been too long.’

‘I just wish that Prowl was here,’ said Wheeljack. ‘And Optimus, for that matter.’

Ratchet nodded. ‘I can’t believe he’s come and gone. It feels as if he died yesterday.’

‘You should’ve seen some of the young ‘uns,’ chuckled Hound. ‘They didn’t know what to make of him – they’d only seen him in holo-decks and on the Wall of Fame. This massive Autobot talking about the “sanctity of freedom” and the planet’s “life-lineage”. Wow.’

‘I wonder what Optimus made of us.’ Mirage closed his eyes and imagined the scene. ‘I was waiting for Jazz or Bumblebee to walk in wearing their Pretender suit. So much happened during the Ark years. At least we have some stability now.’

‘Perhaps something is going to change,’ decided Wheeljack. ‘But not for the better.’ The others looked at him. ‘I’m serious. Don’t you ever get the feeling that we’ve had our time, our turn in the spotlight? I don’t just mean us Autobots. Decepticons, too. We’ve trampled over this planet for millions of years, and yet suddenly – from nowhere – the Quintessons wrest it from our control. I was thinking about the population slump, and about predestination. How long before we lose out to the next phase?’

Mirage balanced on his elbows. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Evolutionary development. How long before our successors arrive on the scene? Maybe we’re just one stage in Primus’ grand plan.’

Hound laughed. ‘You’ll be praying to the Covenant next.’

‘Okay then, let’s go with Mirage’s pipe dream. We make peace with the Decepticons, we solve our energy problems, we rebuild the planet and we fine-tune the biomorphic process. I know you’re an antimorpher, Ratchet, but listen: we’d have enough energon to justify split-cell reproduction and initiate the re-pop procedures Rodimus proposed.’

‘And you think,’ said Ratchet, ‘that over time we’d end up with a new race of Cybertronians with unique characteristics.’

‘Maybe it won’t take that long. We’ve evolved in fits and starts – Headmasters, Powermasters, the Nucleon fiasco, the rediscovery of liquid morphing. And all that’s in the last thirty years. Who’s to say the next jump won’t phase us out completely?’

‘You’re saying that’s a bad thing?’

‘No, Hound, I’m just saying... actually yes, I *do* think it’s a bad thing. It’s not fair, for a start. We had the tail end of the Golden Age and four million years of war.’

‘No, Wheels, we got a sabbatical for four million years.’

‘My point is that there’s never been a let-up. We deserve some peace.’

‘Is there such a thing,’ Mirage wondered aloud, ‘as a war that never ends?’

‘Maybe it will end, but maybe it won’t be us fighting it. Maybe it’ll be a different set of Autobots and Decepticons. Maybe they’ll call themselves something else, and fight for different reasons, and, in four million years, have conversations like this one.’ Wheeljack looked around for support. ‘Well, *I* think it’s going to happen. It has to. We can’t stem the flow of the war, and we can’t stem the flow of our race. A new breed. You’ll see.’

‘And on that note,’ smiled Ratchet, climbing to his feet, ‘it’s time I got back to the medi-vault and started packing.’ He checked his chronometer. ‘I enjoyed that, guys. Must do it again sometime.’

‘Yeah,’ said Hound, brushing grit from his hands. ‘Let’s make a date right now. Same time, same place, in four million years?’

Wheeljack waved his arms to silence the laughter. ‘Listen! Can you hear that?’

‘Yeah. Aircraft noise.’ Hound concentrated. ‘Hydrogen recyc jets – it’s a space shuttle. Astrotrain?’

‘Astrotrain it is,’ confirmed Wheeljack, pointing to a dark slab approaching from the north. He reached for a weapon that he’d left in the lab. ‘What do we do?’

‘We wait,’ said Mirage. ‘We don’t jump to conclusions. This could just be a friendly visit.’

The others looked at him as if the Dark Matrix had just tapped him on the shoulder.



‘Do friendly visitors drop bombs?!’ cried Wheeljack, pointing to a black shape that was falling from Astrotrain’s underbelly.

The Autobots ran towards Delphi and dived to the ground. A series of jarring thuds marked impact but there was no explosion, no shudder of light.

Ratchet was the first to lift his head and the first to approach the half-dozen large black containers jutting out of the ground; angular and crooked, like rotten teeth splitting a gum, each one was stamped with a pentagonal insignia. The nearest had split on impact and spilled its contents. Ratchet fell to his knees and dragged his hands through hundreds of Anti-Inhibitor chips, duodurillium ingots, energon swabs, syringes, resus-packs, cold-blade scalpels and arc welders.

He was still doing so when Chromedome came running outside. ‘You’ve found the supply drop, then. I lucky-dipped an open transmission as we were disassembling the comms equipment.’

‘Who do we have to thank?’ asked Mirage.

‘I don’t know. The caller said he was a friend of yours, Wheeljack. And whoever buzzed us had another message, one from Fulcrum. He thought it might be important.’

‘And is it?’ asked Ratchet.

‘Depends how much importance you attach to last words. Nightbeat’s, in this case. Only Fulcrum was present when he actually died. Nightbeat said something strange before shutdown, and it’s been bothering him.’

Ratchet nodded sympathetically. ‘I’ve heard many deathbed homilies in my time. What was it?’

‘Heath re: nigh know want too.’

January 12<sup>th</sup> 2013.

Rodimus Prime was happy.

He was standing in Autobase (the original one, the one that had been all-but destroyed in 2010 – well, sometimes you had to move back to move forwards), and had just heard more good news from Kup (Kup! It was amazing how they’d managed to find the old Autobot’s brain module inside his chest and resuscitate him). According to Kup, Thunderclash wasn’t dead; on the contrary, the Star Former was safe and well, and keeping himself busy in the Galactic Core – it turns out that the robot Ultra Magnus killed on Aquaria was a facsimile construct! Incredible! Prime chuckled to himself at the thought of working with an FC all these years... no wonder their arguments always used to go round in circles. The real Thunderclash was popping over to help Magnus rebuild Metroplex and transport him to the new Autobot City: Earth.

Rodimus Prime was happy.

So much had happened over the last few days. He shook his head in disbelief at the effects of yet another new strain of Nucleon – ÜberNuke™ – that was already being called ‘the new Lifecode’ by robo-medics across the galaxy. With the Decepticons’ invaluable help, the magic potion was being distributed across the planet. So far, as well as curing Prowl of Corrodia Gravis and flushing the Inhib Chips from every Reddie’s body, ÜberNuke™ had successfully resurrected every Transformer who had died over the last few weeks. By extracting a genetic memory of their Vorcode (preserved in everything from scraps of metal to ancient vidpics), the wonder drug had been able to generate a whole new body and brain. It was a miracle cure, bestowed upon them by Primus Himself, who had appeared before a crowd of thousands in the form of the Keeper. As well as denouncing the Old Texts as a ‘book of lies’, Primus had demonstrated his divinity by initiating a planet-wide regeneration. All trace of the Quintessons’ occupation was removed, from the Recyc Plant to the Kledji Concentration Camp, from the acres of dead-space to the red-raw Cleanlands. The planet looked exactly as it did before December 2012, warts and all.

Hah.

If only.

Rodimus Prime knew it wasn’t like that.

The rebuilds, the ÜberNuke™, the Primal visitation...

It wasn’t like that *at all*.

Sometimes, the clock could not be turned back. No amount of wormholes could undo what had been done.

From the top:

January 12<sup>th</sup> 2013.

*'...and one day an Autobot shall rise from our ranks and light our darkest hour.'*

Rodimus Prime froze the communicube and walked to the window. He was tired of listening to Perceptor's audio-archives. He leaned against the reinforced glass. Although the newly installed pane still carried the clammy shine of wax and resin, glitter-blue and bounce-back, the Autobot leader of 2013 could still see the Manganese Mountains.

He picked plexi from the windowsill and gave names to every knuckled peak and slope-line: Podux, Nelia, Syriak, Voto, Spix, Thelius, and so on, and so forth. The mountain range arced into a notched spine and ran flat against the horizon before his repository of tags and labels ran dry. The geology of this quadrant had been deep-trodden into his subconscious after so long living in the old Autobase a few miles west.

At least he knew where he was. As for how he arrived here...

His memories followed a rigid linear order, but he found it difficult to swap or separate. A block of missing time was bookended by painfully sharp flashbacks. One: the rank and file claustrophobia of a troop inspection/the airtight handshake of a Decepticon named Doubleheader/the hair-thin grin on the traitor's face as a chest plate split wide. Two: blurred contours settling into the outline of a viewing gallery/Cloudraker pulling a syringe from his forehead/being helped to his feet by Ratchet in an otherwise deserted medi-vault.

The period in-between was lost to him, maybe forever.

He knew he hadn't died, and he knew he hadn't been entirely alive: was there a third state between the two? He tried to fill the blanks, but whenever his mind settled on imagery or metaphor he realised he was using poetry to describe the unknowable. Even Perceptor's scientific blitzkrieg, delivered with ravenous aplomb the moment they'd met, had left him unconvinced. Had he really existed as a thought-form, an echo-wave defined by outside properties? And had all this been the precursor to a gradual lull towards conceptual zero, towards total absorption into the Matrix? And what the hell did any of that mean, anyway?

He had no answers, no certainties to cling to, but he felt that it had been the prospect of Matrix absorption that had kept him alive. Becoming one with the Matrix? No. A thousand times no. Anything but that. He already knew what was *inside*.

What about the outside world? He'd wandered through Delphi and seen fragments of High Command, cross-sections of Ultra Magnus' Terran subgroup and a handful of AMC1 patients. He must have asked himself the question a hundred times before he dared to say it aloud, and a hundred more before someone answered.

Kup was dead.

Three words. Three words and he wondered why the sun was still in the sky, why Cybertron still pushed against the soles of his feet, why language still had meaning, why the universe itself acted as if nothing had happened.

He had shut himself in a room and stared at the walls until dust settled on his optics.

Kup was dead.

Other people were dead, too. But there were lots of other people, and there was only one Kup.

Then came the details. Packed into a shuttle bound for Edeus, the explanation began with one word – Quintessons – and continued for hours. By touchdown at Novum Kahn he knew everything: the Alliance, the wormhole, Optimus Prime, Aquaria, Thunderclash, the Inhibitor chips, Metroplex, the Polyhex Massacre, Death's Head, the destruction of Autobot City, the fall of Darkmount, the ransacking of Autobot City and AMC1, the new Smelting Pool, the new fortress, the Quinticons. How it happened, when it happened, to whom it happened. He knew everything except why.

And here he was, an old player in a new game.

He stared at the sun until it was obscured by a passing Autoshuttle. His retinal filters pounced on the focus shift, swapping solar-burn and flame-haze for his own pencilled portrait, gaunt and stilted, etched with cartographic detail on the window's tint and lean. Everyone else said he looked fine. Cloudraker was pleased with his recovery, Fixit was pleased with the body repairs, Ratchet was pleased with how effortlessly his body had accepted Matrix reinsertion. Everyone was *pleased*.

He was metalled and tintured, physically reborn in a buffed bodyshell made from tendoflex musculature and tensile adamantium. Yeah, he looked okay from the outside, but what did that prove? He felt he was hiding behind one-way glass, flashing back what the observer expected to see.

He assessed his features and decided that only the optics gave it away. If the texture of his eyes had been reproduced across the rest of his body, he would have looked pained and ingrained, with skin splintered at a near-molecular level: a final breath away from rust and breakdown.

He stiffened as High Command shuffled into the room. Ultra Magnus, Perceptor, Mirage, Red Alert, Ratchet and Siren sat at the conference table, initiated a circle of sideways glances, and waited for their leader to acknowledge them. Rodimus abandoned the view only when Mirage and Ratchet began chatting; their conversation stalled as he sank into the only spare seat.

'I'd like to thank everyone for coming,' he mumbled, 'to this, the first meeting in our new Edeus Autobase. The conversion is complete. Thanks to the efforts of yourselves and your teams, this old asylum has been successfully...'

'Redecorated.'

'Yes Siren, redecorated. All Decepticon corpses were shuttled to Helex for collection.'

'What about the indeterminate bodies?' asked Ratchet.

'Where possible, they have been reduced to their core torso.' The words tasted horrible in Rodimus' mouth; even the terminology was sickening. Breaking his self-imposed vow, he thought about his earlier journey Downstairs.

*A routine check of the basement level – albeit one frustrated by a padlock, cold-set and motion-frozen, with state-of-the-art internal clampdown mechanisms and three layers of tenium alloy – had ushered horrors into his head that would never leave. He remembered descending the stairs with Ultra Magnus and hearing the first sounds – mumbled and backward, pitched between a scream and a sigh. Their torch beams fell across waves of pink-tint glass, and when the overheads flashed on, everything became clear.*

*The Transformers (could you still call them that?) were displayed in vertical test tubes, which in turn were arranged like exhibition pieces among the bleached corridors and black ceilings. Blind with pain, pumped with artificial light and digital hormones, they scratched the transparencies, chased their own movements and banged their heads against their wrists.*

*He remembered hearing someone talk about experiments and gene-splicing, techno-alchemy, cross-fertilisation, meld theory and something called 'brute hybrids'. When he dragged his hands from his face and his face away from the tubes he saw that Magnus was reading from someone's datalog.*

*Another room, another set of monstrosities. He saw the half-forms, the works in progress, the bodyfreaks suspended in sugary preservatives, condemned to decay at half-speed. Some had hands for heads and arms for legs, as if they had fallen apart and been reassembled at random. Body parts were racked like missiles, tagged and alphabetised, surrounded by instruments that seemed better suited to carpentry than surgery: hack-saws, hammers, cutters, welders. There was a pneumatic drill in the corner. Tabletops looked like dressing tables; chemicals, acids and corrosive agents were arranged like cosmetics - balms, moisturisers, unguents.*

*He heard smashing glass – Magnus dragging monsters from jars – and stumbled on, hoping for an exit or an explanation. In the room furthest from the entrance, he found it. Trapped within a rigid scaffold and lit from all sides, standing twice his height and staring straight ahead, was a hollow exo-suit; a freestanding shell of body armour stitched together from then dead skin of countless Transformers. A new body, but for who? He never wanted to find out.*

'The basement has been filled in with plasto-steel,' Rodimus said out loud, eager to steer this thoughts back on track, 'but the rest of this place was ripe for reformatting. We have retained two cell-blocks for containment purposes, and used materials and equipment stripped from Metroplex's bodyshell to convert the other blocks into science labs, storage bays, Autoshuttle hangars and workshops.'

'And Metroplex himself?' asked Ultra Magnus, 'How has he coped with the transplant?'

Rodimus flipped a keypad on the tabletop. 'Let's ask him, shall we?' The main screen flickered into life and clouds of pixels became Metroplex's head. 'How does it feel being the heart of another Autobase?'

'Wonderful, commander.' Many present had never heard Metroplex speak, and did not know that his old, thunderous baritone had been toned down. He sounded calm and relaxed. 'I am humbled by the time and energy expended in bringing me back on-line. Chief Engineer Wheeljack has excelled himself.'

'Wheeljack used remote cerebral networking to connect Metroplex to every keyboard and electrobar in this base,' explained Rodimus, holding up his right hand. 'Show us what you can do, Metroplex.'

On the runway outside, an anti-aircraft gun targeted the command room's rectangular window and drew circles on Rodimus' palm.

'Very impressive,' said Red Alert. 'It'll certainly make my job a lot easier.'

‘Thank you, Metroplex. That will be all.’ Rodimus returned to his seat. ‘If you see Slammer walking the corridors, don’t worry: it’s a hologram. Metroplex can generate his own assistants to act as maintenance monitors and security guards.’

‘Do we really need all that weaponry outside?’ asked Mirage. ‘You’d think the Decepticons were about to come round that mountain any moment.’

‘If I know Galvatron,’ said Rodimus, staring hard at his Chief Intelligence Officer, ‘he isn’t just sitting idle. He’s ignored all my requests for a meeting to discuss terms of disarmament. Until we make positive contact I want us on our toes.’ He waited until Mirage looked away. ‘Right. Good. I’ll take your reports now. Magnus?’

‘I have three away teams working to clear the last of the Autobot City wreckage. Then we start repairing the landscape itself. The Quintessons hit us hard. We’ve found several bodies on the periphery of the blast crater and the bioscanners indicate a dozen more buried in the rubble.’ He looked across the table at Ratchet. ‘We may be looking at isolated brain modules here.’

‘Just get them into my theatre.’

‘Is that all, Magnus?’

‘Just a couple more things, commander. Firstly, a matter of clarification. I understand that there are no plans to build a new Autobot City on Earth.’

‘Not at this time, no. I just don’t see a need for it anymore.’

‘Perhaps a military outpost isn’t necessary,’ said Ultra Magnus, ‘but the agreement with President Blackrock is too valuable to waste. We should establish another energy farm or, I don’t know, a medical centre...’

‘I cannot foresee a time when anyone here will need to go all the way to Earth for medical treatment. AMC2 can handle anything. I’m sorry Magnus, but Autobot City has served its purpose. If the war flares up it will be fought on Cybertron, not Earth. We’ve tainted too many worlds. What was your other point?’

‘It concerns something Xenon told me on Aquaria. Perhaps I’d better see you in private.’

‘Fine. Perceptor, did you complete the trawl of the Archive Centre?’

‘Yes. We found no bodies. The Quintessons were eager to boost a nascent prison population. All survivors were rounded up and brought... well, here.’

‘And that brings us to you, Ratchet.’ Rodimus had left the surgeon until last, partly to delay the inevitably depressing report, partly to delay the personal criticism he knew it would contain. ‘How are the ex-prisoners?’

‘We’ve injected Anti-Inhibitor chips into everyone who was incarcerated. Immediate physical deterioration has been halted, and they don’t need intravenous energon feeds or a stasis pod anymore. While we cannot remove the original chip, we’ve re-sprayed them as part of a long-term rehab program.’

‘That all sounds very positive,’ said Rodimus, turning away.

‘I haven’t finished yet. While it’s too early to speak of lasting effects, we’ve already detected several worrying anomalies. Okay, the counter-chip is 100% successful in restoring lost strength, but it doesn’t *always* free up the morphcore. Many Autobots – and Decepticons, I’ll wager – can no longer transform. And because the chip is lodged in their brains, a simple body-swap or an infusion of Nucleon won’t change things.’

‘We saw what happened after Grimlock’s first mass resuscitation in 1991,’ said Red Alert. ‘I saw some people break down when they discovered they could no longer transform.’

‘Exactly!’ Ratchet tapped his finger against the table. ‘We’re focusing on bodily defects, but what about *psychological* ones? No one seems prepared to address the tremendous mental strain these people have endured.’

‘You sound as if you’ve done some research, though,’ said Rodimus.

Ratchet counted on his fingers. ‘Post-traumatic stress, clinical depression, nervous collapse, memory loss. You want more?’

‘Not particularly, no.’

‘And *this* is why I am so opposed to using their old gulag as a location for a new Autobase. Have you any idea what this is doing to some of them?’

‘We’ve been through this, Ratchet. I’m happy for people to stay in AMC2, in Maximus’ old base, until they’re ready to move here.’

'Rodimus, they may never be "ready". This experience isn't overcome overnight. I've *spoken* to these people! It wasn't like spending a few minutes in a Decepticon holding cell: it was total physical and emotional torture. Sunstreaker hasn't left his circuit bed for ten days! He had to be sedated!'

'How's Prowl?' Rodimus locked onto Ratchet's gaze as he spoke; he knew the question would throw him. Anything to stop the criticism.

'I'm glad you brought that up,' Ratchet replied after a pause. 'We need to discuss funeral arrangements. I think he deserves a full send off – orb salute and one-bot barge – but others say he would have preferred a quiet service and recycling.'

'Isn't this all a tad premature?' Perceptor frowned. 'Prowl isn't dead yet.'

'Unfortunately, "yet" is the operative word. There's simply no surviving donor. If we build the barge now it will be ready for when the virus reaches his brain. But q-pod or not, I can't be sure that he won't feel anything in the meantime. Corrodia Gravis has properties we've never fathomed – Jetfire and Snarl spoke of tremendous pain even when they were off-line. I can't sit back if there's a chance Prowl is suffering. Euthanasia is the only option. I'm sorry, but that's how it is.'

'Build the barge,' said Rodimus at length, 'but let him die naturally. Anything else?'

'Yes,' said Ratchet, determined not to be brushed off. 'We've had another biomorphic birth.'

Mirage stared at his lap, unable to make eye contact with anyone. He'd been the first to self-generate, creating a protoform shortly after the funeral.

'Hound went into pre-Channel eclampsia late yesterday afternoon,' continued Ratchet, 'and we delivered in AMC2.'

'And the protoform...?' asked Rodimus, afraid of the answer.

'The same as all the others.'

Ultra Magnus stood up and walked to the window.

'That makes five now,' said Perceptor. 'Windcharger, Brawn, Trailbreaker, Cliffjumper... and you, Mirage. Five biomorphic seizures in the last month. I've never known such a spate of Channelling. It could mark the beginning of a population explosion.'

Siren shrugged. 'It's not as if there's any pattern to the births, either. There's no connection between the five 'morphers.'

It was Red Alert's turn to look at the floor.

'Forget the demographics,' said Rodimus. 'What I want to know is why five Autobots have given birth to five Quintessons.'

'What are we going to do with them?' asked Magnus, turning away from the Manganese Mountains. 'Quintessons or not, we can't keep them sealed up in stasis forever.'

Ratchet nodded. 'I've run all the tests I can, Rodimus. There's no point keeping them off-line anymore.'

'I've given this serious thought. You say they've displayed no anti-Autobot tendencies?'

'They're completely passive; in fact, they're almost like blank slates.'

'It's too dangerous for them to remain on Cybertron. I asked the Star Formers if they could recommend any uninhabited cyber-moons near the Galactic Core, but they've been a little... frosty since Thunderclash's death.'

'What about the Legion of New Cybertron?' asked Perceptor.

'Yes, I must contact their Centuro, Star Saber.'

'We could do with another Empire rep on High Command,' said Red Alert. 'Perhaps Star Saber would be interested in becoming more involved with things back home?'

'I doubt it,' said Mirage. 'The Star Formers and the L.O.N.C. are obsessed with the non-intervention policy. It's hard enough getting them to acknowledge our existence, let alone pay us a visit.'

Siren nodded. 'We bombarded the Galactic Core with maydays when the Quintessons attacked back in 2008, and they did nothing. We didn't even bother asking for help this time round.'

'We drafted the policy as part of the Amnesty Agreement, so we can't complain,' said Rodimus. 'I'll offer Star Saber a place on High Command, but I can't see that he has a future here. It's a shame that Prowl isn't around to sweeten the pill: he made such a big impact on him during the peace negotiations. I even sent Star Saber a copy of the Autobot Code. It came back with a list of proposed amendments.' Rodimus spread his hands. 'Anyway, I'll update everyone at the next meeting. Dismissed.'

Chairs scraped and new shadows filled the walls as the Autobots stood to leave. Siren was forced to synthesise a cough to halt their departure. 'I know I'm a newcomer to these meetings,' he said as chairs were refilled, 'but I still have something to report.'

'I'm sorry, Siren,' said Rodimus, but stayed standing. 'What was it you wanted to talk about?'

'Nightbeat's last words: *Heath re: nigh know want who*. Chromedome and I spent the best part of ten days trying to decrypt them.'

'I thought they were just nonsense,' said Ratchet. 'A random vox-box snippet or an old speech fragment that got looped.'

'We thought so too, at least until Chromedome accidentally speeded up Fulcrum's message. We realised that they weren't Nightbeat's last words.'

'He said something else?'

'No, they were his last *numbers*: E3 9012. They're co-ordinates. For a place on Earth.'

Languid and groggy in the relentless humidity, the MARB struggled to stay aloft, leaving parallel lines on the swamp's terracotta surface. Mosquitoes and tormor flies who could not escape its gold-rimmed turbines were churned into the foam.

The true Antarctic sky was hidden behind a blanket of yellow cloud. Thousands of years old, black-barked and monolithic, the trees huddled like conspirators and clawed the swampland with their roots. A network of green-streams, algae and soil wallowed in a unique, hermetic ecosystem. Softened and steamed by geothermal currents and invisible heat, each knot of foliage was brushed with stale sweat and mildew.

'I don't know why humans call this place the Savage Land,' said Hound, carefully pushing branches from his shoulders. 'I think it's beautiful.'

Chromedome struggled with the MARB controls, finding it difficult to negotiate the platform. He was sick of the heat, the snakes, the poor visibility. 'This place does not match the library footage of Antarctica I scanned before departure,' he huffed. 'I was expecting ice floes and tundra.'

'Most of Antarctica is like that. This region, however, retains the geo-systems and indigenous life forms of prehistoric Earth. They call it the Savage Land. That's what I love about this planet: so many hidden treasures.' He rolled a dollop of sap from a slanting trunk. 'You never know what you might find.'

'Speaking of which, Hound, I trust that you're consulting the life-scanner and not just touching trees?'

Hound flicked on the scanner and held it close. 'Of course. No bio-signs at all.' He tapped the screen. 'Shame. We've almost reached Nightbeat's co-ordinates.'

'Perhaps we misunderstood his parting message.'

'Perhaps.'

'Maybe Siren read too much into it.'

'Maybe.'

Chromedome steadied the MARB engines. 'Anyway. We're here.'

Hound stepped onto solid ground and left the platform wobbling like a rowing boat. E3 9012 was green-walled and wet to the touch, carpeted in sinuous vines and tree roots. He switched off his scanner and looked around. 'Still no life signs.'

They stepped into the clearing, and into warm sunlight. 'Look at the tree-line,' said Hound. Above their heads, the tight black coverage of branches was broken, and the sky was visible through a wide hole. 'Something happened here,' he concluded. 'A flying object broke through the organic canopy and crash-landed.' He backed into something solid and reached out the steady himself. Underneath his palm, underneath the skin of waxy leafing, he felt something smooth and cold.

He peeled back the vine and saw the glint of old metal. 'I think I recognise this,' he whispered.

Chromedome helped him tear off strips of greenery. Soon they were admiring a golden Cybertronian pod. Even when they had set it upright, it only reached their waists.

'What am I looking at?' asked Chromedome.

'An Autobot probe. Very old design; in fact, the last time I saw one was four million years ago, when we were boarding the Ark.'

The Autobots began dismantling the ancient probe. Hound reached inside and found something in the darkness.

'Some sort of glass ball,' he announced, holding it up to the light. 'Is that a communicube inside?'

'No, it's a helmet. Worn by fleshlings after the binary bonding process. I think this belonged to Muzzle, Nightbeat's partner.'

'He had us come all this way for a trinket?'

'There's nothing else in there?'

Hound pushed his arm in up to the elbow. 'Just some dislodged plating.'

'Perhaps this will mean something to the guys back home,' shrugged Chromedome, slipping the orb into his waist compartment. 'But I can't help thinking that Siren expected something more.'

'Siren expected a miracle.'

'Come on. Let's go.'

'Hang on a minute – there *is* something else in here.' Hound felt something rigid and right-angled between his fingers. He showed it to Chromedome. 'Any idea what this is?'

'No. I've never seen one before.'

'I have,' said Hound, and started to laugh.

## *Postscript*

He was never afraid of peace; not like some.

His chisel moved eagerly among the granite, nuzzling the purple stone into gasps of powder and fragment. There was no skill involved, no poise, just a pitch and hammer, a strike to wipe the groove.

Pebbles fell onto the snow and disappeared without trace, much like the name he was erasing from the monument, little by little, letter by letter. He worked backwards, starting from the end: 'T', then 'A', then 'E'.

A dry wind bent the trees; their branches scraped a sky as pale and fleeting as breath on glass.

He paused in his work, straightened, and waited for the woodland to settle. It would soon start to snow, and the snow would scrub detail from the land, wiping the slate clean. He liked the idea, and smiled as he steadied the chisel. The letters 'G', 'I' and 'N' sprang from the trough.

Nightbeat stepped back to admire his handiwork. Just goes to show, he thought, that not even death was set in stone.

A small scratch now marred the third column of names, but it hardly detracted from the grandeur of Optimus Prime's statue. It had been erected in 2006, a few miles from Autobot City, to serve as both a lasting tribute to their leader and a safe place to conceal his body. Even though the Matrix had been passed to Ultra Magnus – and, ultimately, to Hot Rod – no one dared risk sending Optimus Prime's corpse into space (look what happened last time, they said), and so his body was sealed inside an underground tomb. There was also a quiet hope, silently nurtured, that their leader might one day return to them. Three months ago, Nightbeat would have scoffed at the idea of such an unlikely resurrection.

Not anymore.

He ran his finger over the main inscription, lingering on the date of death: 2 January 2006. The scalpel felt heavy in his hand, and for a moment he considered adding an asterisk and footnote reading 'and 1 January 2013'. No: there had already been too many alterations made to this slab over the last few months. It had become a gravestone. The new inscription was plain and direct: *'In Memory of the Autobots Who Died in the Eugenesis Wars'*.

It was funny, he thought, how quick they were to give names to things. The higher the bodycount, the grander the label: the Polyhex Massacre, the Siege of Iacon, the Unicron War – and now the Eugenesis Wars. Maybe giving something a name pinned it down and gave it a definitive beginning and end, and there was certainly comfort to be found in closure.



But why the Eugenesis Wars? He wasn't best placed to answer that, having been absent from much of the post-war soul-searching. The word itself had come from Ultra Magnus, who had used it to describe the process by which a group of seemingly unconnected Autobots and Decepticons had given birth to Quintessons. Perhaps the physical connection between Cybertronian and Quintesson, however unfathomable, seemed to symbolise the way in which the fate of the two races had, for four weeks, become intertwined.

*'In Memory of the Autobots Who Died...'*

Kup, Centurion, Rad, Mainframe, Ammo, Rewind, Grandslam, Longtooth – he ran his hand over three columns of names, wondering how so many people could be reduced to imprints in stone. They were randomly arranged, listed without rank and function, and so Thunderclash shared a column with Emyrissus, Warpath with Wheelie. Only Rev-Tone and Quark had escaped random separation: their names were side-by-side, inches above the climbing snow.

He was reluctant to leave so soon after having arrived. A few miles west, Ultra Magnus was overseeing the final phase of the clean-up operation, but here it was silent; the sound of heavy-duty machinery was not carried on the thick winter wind. Soon the last fragments of Autobot City would be ready for transport back to Cybertron, and he was expected on one of the shuttles. Rodimus Prime's orders had been explicit: no more contact with Earth. Ever.

He rubbed grit from the scar where his name had been. The old Nightbeat might have shrugged off Rodimus Prime's orders, hung around for a few weeks, taken a sabbatical. But he wasn't the old Nightbeat. Not anymore.

How did he feel? He felt no different. The question and answer were inseparable, he realised, and they had plagued him since he'd opened his eyes to Ratchet's smile yesterday. Perhaps he would keep asking himself the same question without ever being certain whether the response rang true.

His last memory: leaning over Teletran-1's mixing desks and splicing together a perfect copy of his personality: every nuance, thought, reaction, emotion and speech fragment. A lifetime had been transferred into electronic data and stored on a hard disc.

He could only guess what happened next. The disc – along with Muzzle and the cure – had been placed inside a probe and launched. He'd not had time to choose a location, having to rely on the last set of co-ordinates in the computer's memory; lucky for him the probe was sent to the Savage Land, where it had remained hidden for almost thirty years. And yes of course it was a gamble.

One thing was certain: appearances. It wasn't the first time he'd been rebuilt, although admittedly the brain module had never been started from scratch. Thanks to Ratchet and Wheeljack, he looked exactly the same, right down to the cavity in his chest for the orb. He mirrored his old self in every detail, every edge and curve. Well, there was one key difference: he looked brand new. A lifetime of wear and tear had been undone, and he was free to collect another set of scars and war wounds. Otherwise, he was a perfect replica. A fake.

*Fake.* The word lingered in his mind. That's what he was now: an expensive copy, superficially identical but with false origins. His life had begun with the press of a transfer key in 1984, and his memories belonged to someone else. The real Nightbeat had died on a slab inside Delphi. He was a Nightbeat 2.0, no more original than the Optimus who had walked out of a Nebulan laboratory in 1988.

He had come here to erase his death certificate, to wipe all evidence of his past self and officially resurrect himself. Looking at the ugly scar where his name had been, where his old life had been, he wondered if he should have come at all.

He looked at the others that had died, and wished someone, somewhere could have pasted together discs and crystals for them all. One name held his gaze so tightly he crouched down to its level. Near the bottom left corner, approached by the soft wave of fresh snow, five letters meant more right now than any others.

It was not the inhuman efficiency of chiselling Prowl's name onto a gravestone before he was actually dead that sickened him, but the fact that Prowl could have been saved. The cure was inside the probe. The tatty metal plate: wasn't it obvious? Why had no one used Megatron's tissue sample to rehabilitate Cybertron's latest *corrodia gravis* victim?

He knew why: because everyone had been too preoccupied with rebuilding him, Nightbeat, to consider a piece of cerebral casing found with a hard disc and a bauble. He remembered Ratchet's smile fading when he'd asked what had happened to Prowl, and being told of 'irreversible deterioration'. He

remembered explaining about a cure, and thinking that the doctor's expression said 'too late' even as Hound was sent back to Antarctica.

Nightbeat turned as someone synthesised a cough and said his name. Ultra Magnus was standing by the tree line, looking uncomfortable.

'We're leaving. Do you want us to pick you up from here? It's not a problem.'

'No. I'll be along in a moment.'

Ultra Magnus half-turned, then looked back at the monument. 'It's going to take time, you know. For all of us.'

'I know. Maybe one day—' Nightbeat pressed his forefinger against his audio receptor and mouthed, 'Personal call'. A moment later his arm had dropped back to his side and he was staring at the fresh batch of falling snowflakes.

'Is everything alright, Nightbeat?'

'Hm? Yeah... That was Cybertron.'

'Bad news?'

'On the contrary.' The corners of his mouth twitched. 'And I get the feeling I'm the last one to find out.'

Ultra Magnus smiled. 'I'll see you shortly.'

Nightbeat watched him head back to the whitened patch of land where Autobot City had once been. He thought he had known the future – as if dabbling in time had given him some unique understanding of how things would work out.

Now he knew differently.

He unclipped his chest plate and placed Muzzle at the base of the monument. Wet white curves hugged the orb as soon as it settled. It would be safe there.

He picked up the hammer and chisel, crouched low, and set to work on the bottom left corner. A fresh scar formed, right to left, as he removed letters one by one.

'L', then 'W'.

It was 1<sup>st</sup> February 2013: the present day, the absolute forefront of his timeline.

'O' came next, crumbling like ash against the blade. R fell as quickly as its neighbour.

Anything could happen. Maybe the war was over. Well, maybe it was.

A final blow, and 'P' simply disappeared.

It was never too late to start again, he thought, walking after Ultra Magnus in the thickening snow.