

Transformers Timelines Presents:
THE DARK HEART OF SANDOKAN

(formerly known as - The Black Sea of Sandokan)

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(Please check out Issue #13 of the Hasbro Transformers Collectors' Club Magazine for the PROLOGUE to this story.)

CHAPTER ONE

The inky blackness of space was pierced by the fluid form of the Decepticon pirate ship *Kalis' Lament*. Shaped like a gigantic cephalopod, the vessel did not push through space so much as it glided. Its silent movement through space was reflected on its bridge, where its crew attended to their duties in silence and complete, utter boredom.

Alarms suddenly brought the crew out of their near catatonic state. The ship's resident scientist, Brushguard was the first to report. "One of our probes is returning. I'm downloading its logs now."

The ship's first officer, Skywarp nodded. "Put it up on the screen." he said, eager to see what was in the probe's logs. The *Lament's* probes were periodically dispatched to nearby solar systems to locate possible targets to plunder for riches and resources. Often they returned with very little worth pursuing, but now and then they would find targets ripe for the taking. That fact alone made every probe's return an exciting event.

The probe's log began to play back on the screen. Every member of the crew looked at the main view screen. It played a recording of the attack on the *Star Arrow* along with several power level readings from the ship. A more invasive scan brought up an image of the Force Chip on the screen. Skywarp's optic sensors widened. "Where did that ship crash?" he asked.

Runamuck was the first to answer. "According to this, the world is known as *Sandokan*. We don't have much information on it except that it has been abandoned for a very long time."

The sound of the bridge doors clanking shut caused everyone to look to the back of the dark bridge. There, the Captain of the *Kalis' Lament*, Cannonball stood with a grim look on his face. He moved his great bulk with precision, walking towards the view screen. Staring at it for a moment, he looked around the bridge at the faces of his crew with grim silence.



“Sandokan ye said, eh Runamuck?” he asked, his rough voice drawing out syllables, quite on purpose.

Runamuck nodded, bringing up an image of the planet from the Decepticon archives. “W-we don’t know anything about the planet sir. It’s-“

Cannonball interrupted the Decepticon. “Tis a cursed planet!” he yelled, stunning everyone into silence.

Everyone looked at their Captain quizzically. Finally, the silence was broken by Buzzsaw who let out a laugh. “Wh-what?! *Cursed*?! What are we, Protoforms? Give me a break, Cannonball!”

Cannonball moved with a speed that belied his bulk, he was on top of Buzzsaw in seconds. His claw hand wrapped around the Decepticon warrior’s neck, squeezing tightly – his grip unbreakable. “Are ye mockin’ me, Buzzsaw? Fer th’ sake of yer Spark I hope not. If ye are, I’ll weld ye to th’ hull of this grand vessel and take her t’ warp speed!”

“I-I apologize s-sir!” Buzzsaw sputtered.

Cannonball leaned in close and glared into his subordinate’s optic sensors and then threw him aside, sending him crashing into a nearby panel. No one else on the bridge dared to move. Cannonball drew himself up to his full height and looked them over. “Listen an’ listen well y’ scallywags. *Sandokan* was once a powerful world, home t’ a race of warriors born an’ bred. Fer o’er three thousand Stellar Cycles they battled each other in an ancient civil war that divided their planet.”

He moved over to his chair and sat down slowly. The crew knew Cannonball loved to draw out dramatic moments and they indulged him, lest they suffer his wrath.



“Then one day, no one knows exactly when, one of the factions made a weapon. Powered by somethin’ called th’ ‘Dark Heart’, they say this weapon was alive! And that, mateys, was the folly o’ the Sandokans. Their own weapon went mad an’ destroyed every last soul on that world! Some believe th’ souls o’ those wretched creatures haunt that world t’ this very day.”

The bridge was silent. The sound of the instrument panels beeping and whirring became almost maddening until Skywarp spoke up. “So, what do we do sir? Stay away? Obviously some defenses are still active on that planet.”

Cannonball let out a loud laugh, his mouth wide, upturned into a smile that looked jovial and deadly all at the same time. “I ain’t no lily livered sprog, Skywarp. No. But we will not be chargin’ in there an’ sharin’ th’ fate of those Autobot fools.”

“Then...what?” Brushguard asked, genuinely curious and mean-

ing no disrespect towards his captain.

Cannonball rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment, his face contorted in an expression of deep thought. Then it lightened up, a smile spreading across his lips. “Aaaaah yes, I know. Runamuck, send out a signal to our sometimes friend, Astrotrain. I’ll be needin’ t’ have a conversation with him!”

Runamuck nodded and began sending out a hail over standard Decepticon frequencies.

Cannonball turned slightly to face Skywarp. “A warrior as powerful and resourceful as Astrotrain will be able t’ soften up any defenses on *Sandokan*. Then we can move in and claim th’ prize fer ourselves!”

Skywarp smiled and found himself reminded of why he liked Cannonball so much. He himself was sneaky and appreciated a good deception, and Cannonball shared in this pleasure. “Excellent, sir. I cannot wait to claim this treasure in your name!”

Runamuck interrupted the two. “I have him sir.”

Cannonball settled back into his chair and turned to look directly at the view screen. In moments, the face of the Decepticon bounty hunter known as Astrotrain appeared on the screen. His stern face betrayed no emotion. He had his bargaining face on already. Cannonball would have been disappointed with anything less.

“I have things to do, Cannonball. Why are you bothering me?” Astrotrain asked, his voice echoing over the ship’s speakers.

“Now, now Astrotrain. Is that any way t’ talk t’ an ol’ friend?” Cannonball asked.

Astrotrain’s mouth twisted into a grimace. “Friend? When the Slag did we become friends?”

Cannonball looked up mockingly, as if thinking hard. “Oh, twas that time me ship rescued ye from burnin’ up in th’ atmosphere o’ *Taros Four*. Remember? The locals tried t’ shoot ye down fer tryin’ to kidnap their princess. Or have ye forgotten yer debt t’ me?”

“I owe you nothing. You rescued a fellow Decepticon, it was your *job!*” Astrotrain said, pointing at Cannonball accusingly.

“Stubborn as always, Astrotrain. Very well then, how’s about I spread th’ word of yer lack of honor and gratitude across th’ stars? By the powers! When everyone learns of o’ that *and* yer incompetence on *Taros Four*, it’ll be a black spot on yer career as a buccaneer!” Cannonball threw in a hearty laugh for good measure.

Astrotrain’s face became a study in fury. He seemed as if he was about to scream, and then he stopped himself and regained his composure. “Alright. I do this and we’re even.” It was a statement, not an offer.

“Aye,” Cannonball said feeling victorious “that will do nicely.”

The negotiation only took a matter of Cycles, with Astrotrain

agreeing to survey the planet, find the Force Chip and acquire it. He would then meet with Cannonball to share the technology from the Autobot ship with him. When Astrotrain had asked why Cannonball was not pursuing the device himself, he explained he was currently “engaged” in another treasure hunt and could not attend to the situation properly. Astrotrain accepted this with no small measure of suspicion.

However, Astrotrain was never one to turn down a potential upgrade to his systems. Not being part of the larger Decepticon army, he had to rely on himself, and over the years that meant upgrading his armor, weapons and sensor equipment to stay alive and one step ahead of his competition.

Astrotrain stood up from his communications panel, set up in a makeshift base located inside a gigantic asteroid. He turned to see his four Mini-Con compatriots staring up at him.

Mini-Cons were small Transformers that had once been treated as mere tools by the Decepticons. Thought to only possess the power to augment the strength of larger Transformers, Astrotrain knew better. Mini-Cons were every bit the equal of larger Transformers. They had their own desires, goals, weaknesses and strengths.

When he recruited his Mini-Con comrades, it was not by force but by offering them riches, power and wealth. The first to join him was Star Catcher, who transformed into an land-based rover. With his help Astrotrain had also recruited Astro-Hook, Astro-Line and Astro-Sinker. With Astro-Hook on the ground, Astro-Line in the air and Astro-Sinker in the sea, the three Mini-Cons afforded Astrotrain the option of accessing environments that would have been difficult for him to explore otherwise – and he made sure the trio was rewarded in kind. In exchange, they offered their unwavering loyalty to him.

Star Catcher was the first to speak. Once upon a time, his Mini-Con language would have sounded like nothing but beeps, whistles and other such mechanical noises to the untrained ear. However, to facilitate communication with Astrotrain, he and the others had long since learned Cybertronian Standard, the language spoken by most modern Cybertronians.

“Sir,” Star Catcher began, his voice clipped and precise “how do we know we can trust, Cannonball? Yes he saved us once before, but that proves nothing. In my estimation of his character, he is quite treacherous.”

Astro-Hook chimed in. “I’ve gotta agree, boss. Me an’ the boys here ain’t feelin’ too hot about dis here mission.”

Astrotrain smiled as he looked down to face his troops. “Cannonball will stab us in the back the moment he gets the opportunity. I don’t believe his word for a second. Once we get in there and grab the item, he’ll probably take us out to get it all for himself! That’s why we’re going to get in there, get the item for ourselves and disappear until I can figure out how to utilize it. Reputation be damned, if I can pull this off I’ll have enough power to prove to anyone I am the best bounty hunter in the galaxy!”

Astro-Hook nudged Astro-Sinker in the arm with his elbow. Pointing at Astrotrain he said “Now see, boss bot here’s got moxie, dat’s why I love dis guy!”

Astro-Sinker nodded and grunted. Astro-Line started walking deeper into the interior of the base, his raspy voice saying “Come on, let’s get recharged.”

“Lift off in twenty Cycles.” Astrotrain said heading to recharge in his own private chambers.



CHAPTER TWO

Something fell on Override's head and she snapped awake. Her internal damage report noted a twelve percent loss in muscle fiber reaction time, some gear damage and small surface damage to her metallic skin. In other words, it was no worse than she had suffered after hundreds of races back on her home planet of *Velocitron*. She pushed herself up off the floor and stood up, surveying the scene.

The *Star Arrow* had been torn to pieces. Two of the bridge's walls were gone, along with much of the ceiling. Control panels everywhere were sparking and a few fires were in the process of dying. To her left Swerve and Blurr were on their knees, trying to stabilize their gyros before standing up. To her right Excellion was already up, madly digging through a pile of scrap. It took her a moment to recognize the familiar shovel arm belonging to Longrack sticking out of the wreckage. She rushed over to help him.

Lifting a large control panel over her head and tossing it aside, revealing Longrack's head. He slowly opened his optic sensors and smiled at the sight of his commanding officer. "A-any landing you can walk away from..." he whispered.

Override smiled, always amazed at his congenial attitude. She continued pushing aside scrap. Every piece she removed revealed the extent of the damage to her comrade. Longrack's left leg had been torn clean off. Shrapnel had embedded itself into his torso. He was lucky to be alive.

Using Override and Excellion for support, he managed to stand up on his one leg. In this condition he could not even move in vehicle mode since his legs contained the very treads he would rely on for movement in his alternate form. "Oh no...this is bad. You'll have to leave me sir, I cannot be responsible for holding you and the others back."

"No one gets left behind." Override said sternly. That put an end to any protest by Longrack, who knew a rhetorical statement when he heard one.

Override and Excellion helped Longrack over to a chair and he collapsed into it. He attempted to activate the panel in front of him, but there was no power flowing to it. Instead, he slid open a panel in his wrist and pulled out a computer pad, taking readings of the immediate area. He may have been damaged, but he wanted to be useful.

A sudden wave of panic struck Override. Kneeling down, she began to dig furiously through random piles of metal. A familiar leg stepped next to her and she heard Blurr's voice asking "Looking for this?"

The old Autobot had a metal box in his arms, the box that contained the Force Chip. "I saw you drop it when the ship began to plummet. I grabbed it and threw it into a nearby panel. Fortunately the mag-locks held through the crash."

Override accepted the box gratefully and opened it. The Force Chip was still functional and had suffered no damage. She closed the box and looked around at her crew. "Okay 'bots, we need to get off this planet. Let's go see if we can salvage anything out there to help us get this thing flying again."

Swerve walked over with a small box in his hand. "I found a dis-

tress beacon sir. The four other ones have all been torn to pieces. This is the only one left.” He handed her the small device.

“Wait! What if that signal alerts whoever attacked us to our location?” Excellion asked.

“A fair question, Excellion, “ Override said accepting the beacon. “that is why we are not going to activate it until we’re sure we are in a secure location.” She opened up the cabin cover on her chest and placed the device and the box with the Force Chip inside. The cover closed with a hiss and a thump. “Now let’s go investigate...wherever we are. Longrack, stay here until we return, defend yourself with this if necessary.” She handed her engineer a spare blaster she carried in her leg compartment.

As the Override led the Autobots out of the *Star Arrow’s* wreckage, she slowly absorbed the nightmarish scene around her. The sky was orange and red, the ambient temperature at least one hundred twenty degrees Fahrenheit (utilizing an Earth measurement her friend Lori would no doubt use). All around them were burnt out buildings, husks of vehicles long destroyed or that had run out of fuel. Drifts of smog moved slowly around the air. The size of the buildings around them indicated beings roughly the size of humans had once inhabited this planet.

Following the defeat of the Decepticons, Override had spent some time on Earth. She had become fascinated by the planet’s diverse cultures and life forms. This world reminded her of Earth in some ways. The vehicles and buildings were all reminiscent of that world, despite their decayed state.

The Autobots walked along a road cracked and full of potholes. Override mentally shivered at any planet that would let their roads degrade to such a degree. However, there was more than natural damage on these roads. Rows of small holes and larger holes with burn marks around them told the tell-tale signs off weapons damage. Her sensors detected fragments of carbon based organic matter. Occasionally insects would scuttle past her but nothing else. The pervasive silence was only broken by occasional gusts of wind or some piece of scrap falling from a high perch.

“War. They were destroyed by war.” Override finally said sadly.

Blurr nodded “Yep. But by the Matrix, what would decimate their world to the point where only insects remain?!”

Swerve put his hands on his hips, scanning the horizon. “Who knows? They were organic. The war could have started with conventional firepower and then changed to mutagenic weapons. If there’s one thing almost every creature in the galaxy can do, it’s find a better way to kill others.”

Override suddenly stopped walking. She looked around warily. “Did you guys hear that?”

The others looked around, confused. “Hear what?” Excellion asked.

“It sounded like someone was talking, whispering. Something like...” she did not finish her sentence, but instead drew her weapon. Its dual barrels flipped out and she triggered the power up sequence that was over in a matter of seconds, leaving the weapon ready to fire.

As the others followed suit, Swerve said “I didn’t hear anything, are you sure you hear-“

Swerve never completed his sentence as the husk of a large vehicle smashed right into his back, sending him flying into a nearby wall. The Autobots turned around to watch in shock as piles of scrap metal, beams from buildings, wire and even street signs coalesced into a form that resembled a face, with four eyes and a mouth. It glared at the group for a moment with eyes that glowed a bright, intense shade of green. Finally, the creature roared one word: “KILL!!!”

Override was the first to fire her weapon. Her twin blasts tore through the head, leaving smoking holes. Blurr followed up with two missiles that exploded on impact, tearing more metal away. Excellion fired a missile as well, blowing off a chunk of the top of the creature’s head. The creature seemed distracted at first, giving them enough time to run towards Swerve, who was trying to stand up.

“We have to get back to the *Arrow* and get Longrack! We can’t leave him out here with that thing!” Override said, already running back in the direction of the *Star Arrow’s* wreckage. Blurr and Swerve followed with Excellion taking up the rear, firing more missiles back at the mass of metal and machinery moving towards them. The head had grown a body now, with tentacles twisting and writhing in every direction under its neck. More wreckage flew at the Autobots and only their lightning fast reflexes allowed them to dodge the onslaught.

“THHHHING?! DO YOU NOT KNOW WHAT I AM?!” the creature yelled, its voice overwhelming the audio receptors of the Autobots.

“Ignore it! Keep moving!” Override ordered. The wreckage was only about one hundred feet away.

“I CANNOT BE IGNORED! I AM THE SINS OF A DEAD RACE. I AM DISGUST GIVEN LIFE, CRUELTY GIVEN INTELLIGENCE, HATE GIVEN FORM. I AM THE BEARER OF THE DARK HEART. I. AM. SYNTHOS!!!”

Excellion looked behind him to see the entire landscape undulated towards them, tentacles grabbing scrap and chunks of buildings and hurling them in their direction. He also saw something else that disturbed him. A shape had begun to form next to the creature’s head, a tube shaped device. When he saw wires snake into the back of it, and a light beginning to emanate he yelled “Down, get down!” as several plasma blasts flew right over his head. Everyone ducked for cover as the blasts struck the ground, sending shrapnel flying everywhere.

Override pointed her weapon at Synthos’ makeshift cannon. “Go!” she ordered the others



as she stood her ground, a large chunk of metal coming within inches of smashing into her left leg. When she had a target lock, she fired and tore the plasma launcher right off of Synthos. The creature howled in anger more than pain.

Transforming into her vehicle form, Override sped alongside her comrades. “That only bought us a few seconds, move!” she yelled.

Longrack spoke up, his voice calm despite his damaged state. “Override, we need to get to a place where there is no tech for that thing to absorb. North east of here, about twenty miles!”

Override did not waste any time. “Blurr, toss Longrack on my back. I’ll use mag-locks to hold him down. The rest of you, transform and roll for it!”

Blurr grunted “You can’t carry him on your back and drive fast!”

“I didn’t spend an entire Stellar Cycle going around the galaxy and upgrading my systems for nothing, Blurr. Trust me, I’ll be fine. Now go!” Override said, her rear mounted sensors already detecting Synthos giving full chase once again.

With a thump, Longrack landed on top of Override’s cockpit. He held on and felt the tug of her internal magnetic locks engaging. Now firmly attached, his optic sensors blurred as Override engaged her engine into overdrive. What was a landscape of mechanical decay suddenly blurred into streaks of white, grey, black and orange. His optic sensors were not accustomed to such speeds and he wound up looking down to keep himself from becoming disoriented.

And before he realized it, they had come to a complete stop. He picked his head up again and saw Blurr, Excellion and Swerve all transforming back into robot form around him. Override’s magnetic locks disengaged and he felt the tug of Blurr and Excellion’s arms as they lifted him off Override. She transformed and surveyed the scene.

Unlike the part of the world they had just escaped, nature had taken its course here. A series of rocky formations surrounded them in a canyon filled with foliage. It had long overgrown without any animals to keep it in check, or so Override speculated. “Over here!” she heard someone yell. She looked over to find Swerve pushing aside some brush to reveal the opening to a cave. “Everybody in.” she ordered, her weapon in hand once again.

The group climbed into the cave one by one, with Blurr helping Longrack limp in. Swerve watched the cave opening for any sign of intruders. Override opened her chest panel and removed the emergency beacon. She set it down on the ground near the cave entrance and activated it.

“I think this is about as safe as it’s going to get here, boys. Let’s keep watch. Longrack, you may want to go into stasis to let your self repair systems do their work.”

Longrack shook his head from side to side. “You need me to figure out what to do about Synthos if he somehow gets to us. I took a lot of scans of him as you guys were taking him on. I think I may be able to figure out what drives that creature. If I can, we’ll need that information just to survive.”

Override nodded and walked up to Swerve, who was looking outward. His jaw was set in a

frown. His optics betrayed little emotion other than total determination. “What’s on your mind, soldier?”

“That this is not the way I wanted to go offline, sir.” he replied without a trace of humor.

“Me neither, so we’re going to make sure that doesn’t happen to any of us, got it?” she replied smiling.

Swerve nodded, his mouth curling slightly at the edges. “Got it.”

CHAPTER THREE

“Fascinating.” Astro-Line said, his face looking into a scanner at his station onboard Astrotrain.

“Huh?” Astro-Hook asked, walking over.

“*Sandokan*. It was once inhabited by a powerful race of warriors. They had not yet achieved interstellar travel, but they had developed amazing ways of destroying each other. Records from across the galaxy are fragmented, but it is impressive how these organics manage to destroy themselves in the most creative ways.”

“You sound like you almost respect those squishies.” Astro-Hook said frowning.

“Indeed. I respect their ability to destroy.” Astro-Line said nodding.

“And that,” said the booming voice of Astrotrain over his internal speaker system “is why we are going in cloaked. I have no intention of letting ancient weapon systems try to take us out before I can get my hands on the prize.”

Astro-Sinker chimed in, his calm voice almost a whisper. “Our approach does not appear have to been detected, sir. I detect no power build up of any kind on the surface.”

Astrotrain began to enter the planet’s atmosphere. The burn of reentry began to raise the temperature inside him. An orange layer of heat formed around him. While his multi-alloyed skin was able to withstand the heat with ease – the plasma blast that struck him was much more harmful.

Inside, the Mini-Cons were picking themselves up of the floor. “What da Slag happened?!” Astro-Hook yelled.

Star Catcher shook his head and struggled over to his control panel as Astrotrain began executing evasive maneuvers. “Weapons fire struck our hull, port side. The reentry burn is giving away our location.”

“Nothing can be done about that.” Astrotrain said, more than a hint of annoyance in his voice. His rapid movements threw the Mini-Cons around inside of him until they each finally strapped into their chairs during a rare moment of calm.

“Did the weapons fire stop?” Star Catcher asked no one in particular.

“Confirmed,” Astro-Line said, sounding more interested than frightened “but another salvo is on its way, impact in five, four, three...”

As Astro-Line counted down, Astro-Hook held on tight to the arms of his chair. “Boss, we ain’t gonna make it!”

Astrotrain did not reply. Instead, he smiled to himself internally. The impacts thus far had not hurt him significantly, but it had knocked him slightly off trajectory. He relished such challenges however and increased his speed, weaving and dodging the next round of blasts. “Astro-troops, prepare for jump!”

Without question each Mini-Con unstrapped themselves from their chairs and headed to the main exit port.

Astro-Line pointed up at a nearby screen. “Our target is on screen. It is some mass of technology, two shoulder mounted cannons and tendrils as well. Its core has a powerful energy source, but it depletes quickly. Jump in twelve clicks, that’s when the power readings will dip after it fires another salvo. We should attack then.”

“Warm him up for me troops,” Astrotrain ordered “I will be right behind you!”

Standing at the exit port, the four Mini-Cons nodded in unison. The exit port slid open, the heavy vertical door making a loud thump as it locked into place. The hiss of hydraulics at work was audible even with the wind rushing into Astrotrain. The Mini-Cons jumped out one by one, led by Star Catcher. As they dropped towards their target, their optic sensors targeted Synthos’ cannons and his head. Their interlinked tactical systems made sure they did not overlap targets.

Star Catcher fired his particle beam cannon first. Astro-Hook followed up by firing twin electrostatic blasts from his chest as Astro-Line transformed into his aerial mode and launched two rockets at Synthos. Astro-Sinker was the last to fire, launching a rocket from his chest mounted cannon. The Mini-Cons saw their blasts strike their target below, sending scrap metal and wires flying everywhere.

Astro-Line stayed in the air as the rest of the team used their built in magnetic repulsors to soften their landing. Touching down on the ground they immediately began charging at the creature, firing their weapons in rapid succession. Oddly, Synthos did not return fire, or even try to throw any wreckage at them. His strange face betrayed no emotion. In fact, it looked set in deep concentration.

Star Catcher continued firing, ignoring the sense of dread that began to build inside of him. Suddenly, Astrotrain appeared in the sky. Within seconds he had transformed into robot mode and thrown himself in front of the Mini-Cons. “Get back!” he ordered.

At that moment, Synthos yelled “DIE!!!!” and a burst of pure white light burst from the creature’s mouth, lashing out at the spot where the Mini-Cons had stood and Astrotrain had landed. The blast struck Astrotrain square in the chest, tearing armor plating off of him and throwing the Decepticon far back into a pile of scrap. While his internal energy dampeners had absorbed a majority of the blast, Astrotrain could not stop the momentum from being thrown back, and he found himself crashing into the Mini-Cons. There was a deafening noise as metal twisted and glass shattered around the Transformers.

Astrotrain’s equilibrium was off, his internal gyroscope trying to align itself. His internal computer recommended going into Stasis Lock but he overrode the command. Standing up he picked his cannon up off the floor. It felt heavier than it should have and he had to rest his left hand on the nearby wreck of an aerial vehicle to stabilize himself.

Astro-Line swooped in and transformed, landing in front of his commander. “Are you alright sir?” he asked, helping Astro-Hook to his feet.

Astrotrain nodded. “We are not dealing with a slouch here. We must change our approach to dealing with this thing.”

Astro-Sinker pushed some metal beams off of himself and stood up. “And what approach is that?” he asked, sounding more than annoyed.

Astrotrain smiled and looked down at his troops. “What else? We’re Decepticons. We lie, cheat, destroy and take what we want!”

CHAPTER FOUR

After performing some minor internal repairs, Astrotrain and the Mini-Cons flew over to the site where they had fought Synthos. Astrotrain stopped, hovering in mid-air and called out “Are you here?! I would speak with you!”

At first there was only a rumble, but soon junk everywhere began to coalesce around a central glow so bright the Transformers could not see into its center clearly. Astrotrain put his arm up to shield his optic sensors. The Mini-Cons did the same as Astro-Line took sensor readings.

As the familiar head formed, twin cannons formed on either side – the plasma emitters that had struck Astrotrain previously. Serrated claws, tendrils, even six fingered hands all formed from the beams, metal and junk all around them. A whine of weapons powering up could be heard as a blue glow began to appear in the barrels of his weapons. Astrotrain admired the creatures’ power.

“SSSSYNTHOS WILL DESTROY YOU...I WILL TAKE YOUR BODY AND MAKE IT MY OWN.” Synthos said. Though he was not yelling, his voice still boomed over the dead and silent landscape.

“I don’t think so,” Astrotrain said smiling “our last battle showed that you can be hurt. And if you think our initial assault was painful, wait until we call our comrades down from orbit!”

Synthos chuckled, managing to make it sound humorless and threatening. “I DETECT NO VESSELS NEAR SANDOKAN, ROBOT...YOU LIE!”

“You did not detect my approach because of my cloaking field. It took my entry burn into your atmosphere for that. They too are cloaked! Do you really believe we would send our entire force down at one time?” Astrotrain made the question sound like a statement. He maintained the smile on his face, unsure if the creature would call him on his bluff. If he did, he was about to be in for one incredible uphill battle.

Synthos considered Astrotrain’s words. The creature did not move. Its face betrayed no emotion. Finally, he spoke. “HATE. I SENSE HATE AND EVIL WITHIN YOU. YOU ARE A WRETCHED CREATURE, WE SHARE A KINSHIP...”

Astrotrain nodded curtly. “Then you know I don’t care about your personal ambition. I have a mission to fulfill, and that is to take a source of great power away from my enemies, the Autobots. Give me safe passage to their location and I would be willing to share the secret of this power with you.”

“YESSS. IT IS THIS POWER THAT MADE ME BRING THE SHIP DOWN. I SENSED IT AS SOON AS THE SHIP CAME INTO THE SYSTEM. WITH IT, I CAN SPREAD MY TERROR TO THE FAR REACHES OF SPACE AND LEAVE THIS ACCURSED GRAVEYARD!” Synthos said, a smile forming on its misshapen face. But that moment passed quickly as his face contorted into a serious expression once again. “AND YOU WOULD PERMIT THIS? MY LEAVING THIS WORLD AND POTENTIALLY DESTROYING WORLDS THAT BELONG TO YOUR EMPIRE?”

Astrotrain shook his head from side to side. “No. The deal is simple. You stay out of our way and we stay out of yours. Interfere with our own ambitions, and you will find yourself facing the

Decepticon Armada. And even you do not have the strength to face us all!” Astrotrain kept his expression of grim determination set in his face. This was an even larger bluff, claiming to be a part of an army he abandoned centuries ago.

“DO NOT THREATEN ME!” Synthos rumbled angrily.

“I do not make threats. These are promises.” Astrotrain said gravely.

“VERY WELL. YOU WILL GO NORTH EAST OF HERE, WHERE THOSE COWARDS WENT TO HIDE. GIVE ME THE SCHEMATICS OF THE TECHNOLOGY THEY HAVE AND YOU WILL BE FREE TO GO.” It was a command, not an offer.

Astrotrain nodded. “Agreed. Astro-troops, let’s go slag some Autobots!”

CHAPTER FIVE

Life used to be simple. That's all Override could think. The phrase repeated itself in her mind as she fired into the air at her attacker, a Decepticon bounty hunter named Astrotrain whom she had heard of, but never met until today.

About two Stellar Cycles ago, her greatest concern was being the fastest racer on the Speed Planet, *Velocitron*. Maintaining her standing as the planet's fastest and toughest Transformer was all that being "leader" required of her. Then Optimus Prime and his Autobots showed her that the universe was a much larger and complicated place than she had ever thought possible. She learned about responsibilities beyond her role as a racer, embracing the ideals of compassion, selflessness and valor – all critical parts of being a leader.

Unfortunately, all leaders experienced bad days, and this one was turning out to be the worst yet.

Astrotrain had attacked without warning, having used his cloak to get near the cave where the Autobots were hiding before unleashing his potent weaponry on them. Blurr, who had been on guard, was knocked unconscious early on by weapon blasts combined with falling rocks. Excellion was watching over him and Longrack as Swerve and Override charged outside to stop Astrotrain from wreaking more havoc upon them. Unfortunately, the large Decepticon had help. Four Mini-Cons were peppering Override and Swerve with firepower, making it difficult for the Autobots to concentrate on shooting him down. Worse, Astrotrain was *laughing* at her incessantly.

"Ok, that's enough!" Override yelled transforming into vehicle mode. She focused on linking her systems to the inter-dimensional pocket of space where she could access her Cyber Key. The Key appeared seemingly out of nowhere and connected to her rear engine. Twin cannons swung out and she immediately charged at the nearest Mini-Con, the one she had heard the others referring to as "Astro-Hook". She fired at him and he dodged several blasts, when she was close she applied her brake turned hard, sending the rear of her vehicle form crashing against the Mini-Con. Astro-Hook went flying into a pile of nearby boulders.

Override did not stop. She saw Swerve taking care of Astro-Sinker and veered towards a nearby patch of grass and rock that angled upwards. She launched herself up into the air and transformed into robot form. Catching her weapon in mid-air, she took aim at Astro-Line and fired off several blasts before crashing back onto the ground. The blasts struck the diminutive aerial warrior, causing him to go down with plumes of smoke coming from his wings.

Override used her legs to push herself up off the floor. Sensing a presence behind her she immediately turned around, weapon aimed at her assailant only to freeze before she could even pull the trigger.

She looked up to see the smiling face of Astrotrain. His back mounted wings obscured the sun and gave his metal body a glint that somehow managed to make him look more threatening. However, his face was not what concerned Override. What did concern her was the unconscious form of Swerve he had gripped with one arm and the other arm holding his cannon against the Autobot's head.

Override adjusted her optic sensors, focusing on the best way to blast the Decepticon without causing an explosion that would harm Swerve. “You know, even though we’ve just met, I’ve heard of you, Astrotrain.” She said, hoping to buy some time.

Astrotrain smiled a bit more. Override observed that it looked like his smile connected audio receptor to audio receptor. “Have you now?” he asked, in a voice that was less than humble. Much less.

Never underestimate the power of the ego Override thought to herself. “From what I’ve heard about your reputation, taking a hostage is beneath someone of your combat prowess and stature.” she said, with more than a hint of insulting bemusement in her voice. She realized there was no way to take down the Decepticon with one blast. She began to lower her weapon’s energy charge down to minimum.

The laugh that left Astrotrain’s voice processor was loud and seemed to echo throughout the valley. Not once did his arms move. He obviously worked well under pressure. “See, that’s where you Autobots just don’t get it,” he said, pointing the cannon even closer to Swerve’s head “I am a Decepticon. Just because I don’t belong to the larger army proper, it doesn’t mean I don’t subscribe to the same rulebook they do.”

Readjusting her aim, Override knew she had to buy time. Unfortunately that was a luxury that was quickly disappearing as she saw the Mini-Cons rising from their fallen positions one by one. “And what does that rulebook say about hostages?”

Astrotrain’s smile turned into an ominous grin. “If your subject does not cooperate, shoot the hostage.”

It was Override’s turn to smile. “Funny. That’s exactly what I was thinking!” she said as he fired her weapon right at Swerve’s chest. The minimal power blast shocked the Autobot awake. Stunned that an Autobot would fire on one of their own, Astrotrain hesitated and weakened his grip for a second. That was all the time Swerve needed to duck down out of the Decepticon’s arm and roll away. Astrotrain fired his weapon, but missed the escaping Autobot.

Override continued firing, flicking a switch that boosted her weapon power back to maximum. The successive blasts knocked off pieces of armor and left burn marks on Astrotrain’s armor, but he was undaunted. He quickly returned fire and Override jumped out of the way.

As she landed, she looked around and realized the Mini-Cons were gone. Alarms went off in her head and she yelled “Swerve, get back to the cave! The Mini-Cons are after the Force Chip!”

As Swerve followed his commander’s orders, Astrotrain charged at Override with a balled fist. She side stepped and he went flying past her. She brought up her knee just in time to kick him in the waist. He reeled back as she stepped back. Firing off two more blasts, she ran at him. Astrotrain stood his ground, fist up and legs ready to pounce. At the last second she jumped up, over his head and kicked back hard, her foot connecting with the back of Astrotrain’s head. The Decepticon went sprawling forward as Override landed.

Astrotrain turned, a murderous look burned into his optics. He put his gun away and mounted

his shield onto his arm. "Let's try that again." he said activated the boosters on his feet. He charged forward and Override quickly stowed her weapon away, preparing for a jump. When he drew close enough, she launched herself up into the air, but Astrotrain quickly turned and reached out to grab her leg. Caught in his snare, Override felt a wave of pain as Astrotrain sent her crashing into the ground, head first.

Override stood up again. She was hurt, but not out of the fight. She opened up a panel on either arm and revealed two small Energon daggers. Triangular in shape, she twirled them in each hand. Having been fashioned from raw Energon by the Omnicon Skyblast, this was one of the first additions to her systems she had made when she began to journey across the galaxy for upgrades. Across the way, Astrotrain was waiting again.

She ran at him and just as she came within arm's length of the bounty hunter, she ducked down and swept one leg against his, knocking him off his feet. She then came up and lunged down with each blade held underhand. Each blade penetrated one of Astrotrain's shoulders and he cried out in pain and fury all at once.

Override slid the blades out quickly and jumped back. "Want to have another go?" she asked smiling.

Before Astrotrain could answer, the combatants heard a raspy voice from above say "Eyes up.". It was Astro-Line, who along with Astro-Hook was holding onto the box that contained the Force Chip.

Override aimed her weapon upwards but was quickly thrown off her feet as Astrotrain's cannon blast struck her in the side. As she went down she heard Swerve scream something and the sound of weapons fire. When her optic sensors came back online, she looked up to see Astrotrain kicking the smaller Autobot away and then transforming into his space shuttle form. The Mini-Cons climbed aboard and Astrotrain rocketed away at top speed. She did notice he was not going straight into orbit however. Rather, he was heading in a south westerly direction. This gave her a small measure of hope.

Swerve was already transforming into vehicle mode to give chase. Override activated her comm-link with him. "Swerve, follow them, but do not engage. I'm going to check on our guys back at the cave and then follow up with you. Report in if they stop anywhere."

Swerve replied back simply "Got it."

The scene back at the cave was not pretty. The Mini-Cons had attacked and caught Excellion off guard. The young Autobot was trying to stand up, his sides and back clearly damaged from weapons fire. Blurr was still on the ground unconscious. Longrack had more scorch marks on him before, but the weapon Override had given him lay on the ground next to him in pieces, no doubt the handiwork of Astrotrain's Mini-Cons. He had a sad, apologetic look on his face. Override just shook her head, letting him know she understood he could not have done more to stop this attack.

Override helped Excellion up. He muttered "I'm sorry." A few times until she told him to be quiet.

From behind she heard Blurr groaning as he stood up. "Creaking crankshafts, that was not

one of my prouder moments. Beaten by four Mini-Cons of all things!”

“They took us by surprise,” Longrack said “they have some type of stealth armor engaged. We didn’t even realize they were in the cave until they de-cloaked and attacked.”

Override looked at the trio seriously. “It doesn’t matter. All that matters now is that we get the Force Chip back. Longrack, you’re with me again. You two strong enough to drive?”

“Just try and stop us.” Excellion said, his fists balled tightly.

CHAPTER SIX

Astrotrain flew towards Synthos' location slowly on purpose. Astro-Line had taken a battery of readings on the creature during their last encounter, and he needed time to process them to confirm Astrotrain's suspicions about the strange beast.

After furious movement, tabulating results and processing calculations, Astro-Line spoke. "Scans confirmed sir. The Dark Heart is an amazing device. Not only can it boost energy present within an existing power core, it also translates mental energy into telekinetic energy."

"A glorious prize then!" Star Catcher exclaimed.

"Combining the Key with the Dark Heart would give new abilities and greater power than ever before. This is turning out to be much more profitable than I would have imagined!" Astrotrain said, amusement coating every word.

As Astrotrain executed a landing near the location where he last saw Synthos, the creature began to form its head again. Star Catcher led the Mini-Cons out before Astrotrain transformed into his robot form. In one hand he held his cannon, in the other the metal box containing the Force Chip. Star Catcher and Astro-Hook stood to his right, Astro-Line and Astro-Sinker to his left.

"YOU BROUGHT IT." Synthos said matter-of-factly.

"Yes. And now, you will share your power with us." Astrotrain said, feeling the swelling of victory building up in his Spark.

"I THINK YOU ARE CONFUSED, ROBOT. IT IS YOU WHO WILL SSSSHARE THAT POWER WITH ME!" Synthos said angrily.

Astrotrain ignored the creature's tone. "No. You are powered by something we are told is called the 'Dark Heart', we want it in exchange for the schematics to this device."

"TTHAT WAS NOT THE AGREEMENT!" Synthos roared.

"I'm amending the deal," Astrotrain said, lifting his cannon at Synthos' head "and you will submit or die!"

"SO BE IT." Synthos said quietly.

There was silence for several tense moments. Suddenly, the ground began to shake and Astrotrain looked around to see figures beginning to emerge from the wreckage that surrounded him. No two forms were identical, and as the junk and debris fell off of them, he began to see what they were.

Each figure was about Astrotrain's height (one was even taller, he noted). They were robots, but not sentient robots like Transformers. The design of these contraptions included cockpits indicating they had been used as war vehicles by the Sandokans. In total, eight of these monstrous forms arose, each with cannons mounted on their arms, some carrying bladed weapons and others were armed with racks of missile launchers armed and ready to fire.

Astrotrain reacted quickly, firing a blast at Synthos' head. However, a metal plate suddenly flew in front of the blast and absorbed the blast, shattering into dozens of sharp metal pieces. The sharp metal pieces immediately turned their sharpest points towards Astrotrain and flew at him! He quickly grabbed his shield from his back mounted storage compartment and threw it up in time to block a majority of the metal fragments. Some made it past his shield however and embedded themselves in his shoulders and legs.

The robots had completely risen from their hiding places and began to converge on Astrotrain and his troops in a circular formation. "They've got us surrounded!" Astro-Sinker yelled.

A smaller robot ran quickly at the Mini-Cons, firing an array of lasers at them. A medium sized robot walked towards Astrotrain steadily, firing weapons that emitted blue streaks of lightning at him. He dodged but felt the heat of the blasts against his metal skin. "Fight back!" Astrotrain yelled.

The four Mini-Cons concentrated their fire on the smaller robot, trying to damage its legs so it could not walk. It was fast however, and dodged their blasts with ease. Astro-Line transformed into vehicle form and fired at it from the air, destroying its cockpit cover with his twin missiles.

Astro-Hook ran up to the robot and transformed into his vehicle form. Using his top mounted claw arm, he grabbed at its leg, trying to either trip it or hold it in place. "Fire!" he yelled, an obvious strain in his voice.

Astro-Line and Astro-Sinker wasted no time in firing at the robot, tearing off one of its legs. The robot fell forward, crashing into the ground nose first.

Before the Decepticons could celebrate, a rapid fire burst of artillery slammed into their backs. They crashed into the ground and looked up to see another robot firing some type of gatling gun at them. Before they could react, it launched a spread of twenty missiles at them. Two slammed into Astro-Hook, one chased Astro-Line through the air.

Astro-Sinker had problems of his own as a medium sized robot punched him hard in the chest with a huge balled fist. He went flying back but even that offered no reprieve as several missiles followed him and exploded against his body before he even hit the ground.

Astrotrain fired an ion blast at the closest robot as he held up his shield to protect himself from another volley of shrapnel thrown his way. Before he could do anything else, a wire coiled itself around his neck and began to pull, threatening to tear his head module off. He strained against it and heard metal creaking, realizing it was his own superstructure straining against the wire. He began to feel panic rising.

It can't end like this! he thought before blasting the wire and freeing himself. The momentum from his pulling sent him flying forward and he threw a foot in front of himself to prevent himself from falling. He quickly flew into the air and yelled "Mini-Cons, Powerlink!"

Without hesitation, each Mini-Con flew into the air, having to blast away at the wires and tendrils threatening to grab them. They each transformed into their vehicle forms and began to link their systems with Astrotrain's. Astro-Hook connected to one wing and Astro-Line to his left arm. Astro-Sinker linked to the other wing. Finally, Star Catcher connected to his right arm. The rush of power was completely euphoric, and Astrotrain understood again why some Decepticons found the use of

Mini-Cons addicting. However, the best was yet to come.

Tearing open the box that contained the Force Chip, he held the device up and stared at it for a moment before the micro-sensors in his fingers tapped into the device, linking with it. He mentally commanded it to connect to his power systems and as he bonded with the Chip, he felt the power within himself and all four Mini-Cons boosted to levels he had never experienced before. All at once, the pains he felt from his wounds disappeared and every muscle fiber in his body felt faster, stronger and more alive than ever before. Through their physical bond with him, each Mini-Con felt the rush of power as well and consequently their power systems increased beyond their own imagining.

Just as the euphoria seemed to reach its peak, Astrotrain felt the power boost once more and he roared at the pain that threatened to overtake him. He willed the power levels into balance and finally the bonding was over and he was now more powerful than he had ever imagined possible.



“NOOOOO!!!!” Synthos yelled.

“Oh ... yes!” Astrotrain said as he aimed his cannon at Synthos’ robots and fired. At the same time, Star Catcher and Astro-Line fired their weapons. This repeated itself seven times until every last robot was destroyed. To his surprise (and some admiration), Astrotrain saw Synthos reveal even more of the robots, another eight. While powerful, their speed was ponderously slow compared to his. He would fly circles around each one and blast them from behind before they could even achieve a proper target lock. When Synthos would attempt to throw something (be it a vehicle or sharp objects) at Astrotrain, he would fly directly upwards and out of the way so quickly he looked like a blur.

“You can only keep up your assault so long, Synthos. I on the other hand can keep this up all day!” Astrotrain yelled as he fired another burst of firepower, this time square at Synthos’ head, tearing a chunk out of it. It reformed, but Astrotrain noted it did so much slower than before.

Through his link with the Mini-Cons, he was able to channel all their knowledge into his data core. Astrotrain accessed all the information Astro-Line had gathered about Synthos, and locked onto the most likely location for the Dark Heart. *It’s in the lower area, right below that pitiful creature’s neck!* he thought to himself as he flew out of the way of another round of blasts. Firing again, he tore a hole right under Synthos’ neck and then dove at the newly created opening. Astro-Line’s sensors detected the Dark Heart directly inside, all he would have to do is tear through about twenty feet of metal and wires.

Astrotrain never got the chance.

Several stabs of pain lanced through his left side and he veered off course, crashing into Synthos' side. He looked up to see the Autobots, all with their weapons aimed at him.

"Back off." Override said, her optic sensors narrowed.

Astrotrain tried to fly into the air, but Synthos acted first, grabbing his legs with two tendrils and throwing him hard against the ground. Astrotrain's shield went flying off into the distance. The impact jarred some circuitry inside loose.

He aimed his gun and destroyed one of the tendrils, but two more replaced it, grabbing at his arms. He struggled to break free. "Are you Autobots insane?! This thing will destroy all of us!"

The Autobots began to fan out in a circle, all except for Longrack who was several feet behind Override, working furiously on a data pad. Presumably he was taking readings of Synthos and Astrotrain.

Override kept talking. "You're not going to steal the Force Chip and the Dark Heart. No Decepticon can be allowed to possess that much power. And besides, near as Longrack here can tell, Synthos is alive, and we Autobots are not going to stand idle while you destroy a living being."

"You fools!" Astrotrain yelled before he focused all his strength, tearing off the tendril holding his left arm. He fired again at Synthos' head. The creature responded by sending a large tank-like vehicle crashing into him, throwing him back into a pile of metal that included sharp beams. Three pierced Astrotrain, one in his right leg, the other his left shoulder and one straight through his chest – narrowly missing his Spark chamber. He fell unconscious and the Force Chip detached from him, dropping to the ground.

Synthos reached for the device. "FINALLY. THE POWER THAT RIGHTFULLY BELONGS TO ME!" he roared.

"I don't think so." Excellion said as he transformed into his vehicle mode, charging at the creature. He fired his top mounted missile launcher and destroyed each tendril reaching for the Chip one by one. A giant claw suddenly came up from the ground and grabbed Excellion. He tried to drive off but to no avail, the grip was too tight. He could not even engage his transformation sequence.

Suddenly, the sound of jet engines roared as Blurr came flying at the claw arm in his aerial form. He fired two missiles that destroyed the claw arm at its wrist, freeing Excellion. "Get the Chip, lad!" Blurr yelled, flying out of the way before Synthos could retaliate.

Excellion wasted no time, transforming into robot mode and grabbing the Chip off the ground. He threw it into his back storage compartment and transformed back into vehicle mode, racing away as fast as he could. He fully expected another claw arm or tendril to lash at him, or perhaps a plasma blast to scorch his already damaged metal skin. However, none of that ever came. He did not stop to wonder why.

Swerve had pulled up next to him, driving in reverse with his dual cannons activated to destroy anything that Synthos might throw their way.

It was then a sound like thunder could be heard in the sky. A moment later Excellion realized

it was in fact a sonic boom. The source was a shape that was growing larger by the second. What emerged from the clouds was an oval shaped shuttle with a large, green skull painted on the underbelly. A hatch opened and several energy ropes dropped from it.

The last sight Excellion ever thought he would be glad to see were Decepticon pirates, but that is exactly what he felt as Cannonball held onto a rope with one hand while firing repeated blasts from his laser arm. Excellion only knew Cannonball from Autobot data files on the *Kalis' Lament* and its crew. He had never met them, and it was really not on the top ten list of things he wanted to do either. However, the pirates provided an excellent distraction.

To Cannonball's right was Brushguard, also holding onto a rope. He threw some type of sphere at the ground. On Cannonball's left was Runamuck, who simply laughed like a mad-bot as he fired his weapon in scattered patterns down below. Hovering next to the trio was Buzzsaw in his vehicle form also firing his weapons.



The sphere Brushguard had thrown fell onto the ground near Synthos' head with a clang and then suddenly exploded into a several large, green vines. They were techno-organic in nature and began to wrap around his head, tightening their grip. Above, Brushguard smiled and said "It works! Ha ha ha ha!"

Cannonball ignored the scientist's cheer as he yelled "Buzzsaw, Runamuck, get Astrotrain and his crew out of here! I'll be handlin' this beast!" as he landed on the ground. He transformed and activated his Cyber Key power, causing a gun port to emerge from either side of his vehicle form. He fired at Synthos, carefully targeting the same area Astrotrain had tried to get before. "At last ye cursed devil, we meet on th' glorious field o' battle!" he yelled.

Synthos was being crushed by Brushguard's vines. The Decepticon scientist ran up to his head and threw another device, this time a rectangular box that attached itself to Synthos head. A stream of gas poured out and settled onto his head. At first nothing happened, but then parts of Synthos began to melt and dissolve. "WHAT ISSSS THISSS?!" the creature yelled.

"A corrosive derived from plants I found on *Centaris Seven*. Amazingly deadly, especially to mechanical beings!" Brushguard said, rubbing his hands together.

The Autobots had all gathered out of the range of the battle. Override took the Chip from Excellion and stored it in her own cabin compartment. She surveyed the situation in the distance and frowned.

“We have to get off this planet.” Blurr said calmly.

Override nodded. “And the Decepticons just gave us the way to do it.” she said pointing at the ropes dangling from the shuttle. “We make a dash for that shuttle, take it over and get out of here.”

“What about the Decepticons? We can’t just leave them here to kill that thing.” Excellion said.

Override looked over at the young Autobot and smiled. She put her hand on his shoulder and said “Ah, there’s hope for you yet. Don’t worry, I have no intention of letting them destroy that thing, no matter how evil it may be. It’s sentient and deserves to live and perhaps one day learn to be something other than what it was created to be.”

“Nice sentiment, but how?” Swerve asked.

“We’ll figure that out once we get to the ship. Now transform and roll!” Override ordered.

Longrack was again thrown onto Override’s back, something he was already tired of. “I’m beginning to feel like one of those Earth creatures, the grey roundish one.” he muttered.

Override chuckled, thinking of a trip she had once taken to a zoo on Earth with Bud and Lori. “A koala bear, and yes, I know the feeling.” she said with some humor in her voice.

Cannonball and the Decepticons were too busy fighting Synthos to even notice the Autobots roaring past them. Astrotrain was still lying on the ground unconscious. As she passed the carnage, Override felt herself worrying for a moment whether they would be too late to stop the Decepticons from destroying Synthos. Part of her questioned her own sanity for even caring about what happened to a creature made to be a weapon and formed from pure hate. However, she knew better. “Freedom is the right of all sentient beings.” Optimus Prime had told her once, and such a right would mean nothing if not applied to all beings across the galaxy. Even Decepticons deserved a chance to live and find an existence that did not involve conquering or destroying.

Override was shaken from her reverie when the energy ropes came close. She hit the brakes and stopped right in front of one. The others had transformed already. Swerve, never one to take things for granted, tugged at the ropes to check them. “Ok guys, start climbing. Longrack, hold on tight.”

Longrack nodded, taking a moment to look behind them at the grim battle being played out. The pirates were thrashing at Synthos, having destroyed more of his defense robots. While the creature was putting up a titanic struggle, the Decepticons had numbers and tactics on their side. He shook his head and put his arms around Override after she had transformed.

The climb into the shuttle was tedious and every moment was dangerous. Now and then, errant blasts of firepower or scrap metal would fly past them. A few actually managed to slice into Override but she kept moving despite the pain.

Once she had climbed into the ship, Override immediately ran to the nearest console. Swerve and Blurr ran to others as Excellion helped Longrack into a seat. Her mind raced furiously as she tried to figure out how to save everyone involved and escape at the same time. As she pulled up schematics of the shuttle, the answer leapt out at her and her face brightened considerably. She turned to the Autobots and said “Boys, this is going to work out after all.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cannonball was generally a gruff, mean-spirited character. That meant whenever he was laughing heartily (and not faking it) something sinister was probably going on. This was one such moment.

What was left of Synthos' defenses had collapsed. The various robots he remote controlled were nothing but piles of ruined scrap. His cannons and tendrils had been all but destroyed. Brushguard's techno-organic, plant based weaponry had been the key to subduing the creature. Synthos' head had been reduced to a quarter of the size, with only two eyes showing now. Smoking ruin surrounded the Decepticons. Sparking circuitry, melted beams and wires, burnt out vehicle husks were scattered everywhere. To a Decepticon, this was a vision of paradise.

Cannonball had one leg propped up on Synthos' head, elbow resting on his knee. "Y'know, after all th' tales I heard about ye, I expected a much more challengin' fight than this." he said, a cruel smile seemingly permanently glued to his face.

Buzzsaw hobbled over, one arm missing, his helicopter rotor damaged. "I think it was plenty tough, sir." he said wearily.

Runamuck was holding himself up by one arm against a pile of scrap. His chest panel was missing, and his armor was cracked in over a dozen places. He nodded and said "Y-yeah...can we go now?"

"Nay. There be one last piece o' business mateys. The Dark Heart, ye scurvy dog, I want it and you'll be givin' t' me if ye know what's good for ye!" Cannonball aimed his laser arm at the remaining portion of Synthos' head.

Suddenly, a fist shot out from Synthos' head and punched Cannonball right across his chin. He rolled with the punch and steadied himself. He said nothing and fired a blast into Synthos' head, severing the fist from it. "Any more fight left in ye?" he asked.

Synthos made a low moaning sound, one of surrender laced with anger.

"That's what I thought!" Cannonball said triumphantly. He began to walk over to claim his prize when he suddenly began to feel extremely light. He looked down to see the ground moving away from him. He looked up and suddenly realized he was the one doing the moving. To his right he saw Brushguard also being lifted up into the air. To his left were Buzzsaw and Runamuck. The unconscious form of Astrotrain and his Mini-Cons floated by as well. "What in the-?" he said to no one in particular.

Looking down at his hand, he saw a familiar green glow. Looking up he saw his own shuttle with its tractor beams activated. He howled with fury, but it did nothing anything to help the situation. "Caught by me own tractor beam! By The Pit!" he screamed.

"Tractor beam locked." Swerve said, with more than a hint of satisfaction.

Override nodded. "Now let's drag these guys to a spot where they can't do harm to anyone but themselves."

With the speed of the Decepticon shuttle at their disposal it did not take long to find a spot clear on the other side of the continent to drop off the Decepticons. Override was put into a stasis chamber so he could get some well deserved rest. Though wounded, the other Autobots insisted on remaining online until they reached safety.

As the Decepticon shuttle exited *Sandokan's* atmosphere Override considered that the Decepticon ship would soon come to investigate the situation. In that time she could only hope that Synthos would manage to gather his strength in time to be able to defend itself if necessary. As it stood, she had to get Longrack repaired and there was no way this small shuttle would be able to stand up to the power of a Decepticon warship. She was not one hundred percent happy with her solution, but it was the best that she could do under the circumstances.

Override wearily collapsed into the nearest chair, finally allowing her to relax. She looked over everyone in the room as they talked and bantered. She smiled, feeling a swell of pride within her Spark at how well her crew had performed. This was hardly the way the mission was expected to go and they all exceeded her expectations by a mile.

“Course setting, Override?” Blurr asked, having finally torn himself away from chastising Excellion for something.

Override looked at the star chart in front of her and smiled at a happy coincidence. She suddenly thought of a piece of Earth trivia and said “To Cybertron. Second star to the right, straight on til morning.”

EPILOGUE

The *Kalis' Lament* had come on time to rescue Cannonball and his crew. Its power was the key to a successful escape off the dead planet. They made it a point to bring Astrotrain and his Mini-Cons along as well, despite Skywarp's protests. Cannonball had kept his focus on the prize however.

When Cannonball walked through the halls of the *Kalis' Lament* without turning his head once, and mumbling to himself to boot, the crew knew he was in a bad mood. Some junior officers stumbled out of his way. Others stood still hoping their Captain would simply ignore them instead of exploding into a ball of fury (and causing them a large measure of pain in the process).

He stopped at the end of a long hallway. The door opened for him automatically. As Captain of the ship, he had no need for door chimes.

Inside the repair bay was Astrotrain attending to his injuries. His Mini-Cons were doing the same. Skywarp had offered him the help of the ship's medical officer, but Astrotrain refused. His reputation for being highly independent seemed to have no bounds. The two glared at each other for a moment.

"Ye failed." Cannonball said quietly.

"Brilliant observation." Astrotrain's voice dripped with sarcasm.

Cannonball finally exploded, his fist crashing down onto a table sending medical instruments flying everywhere. "You are supposed t' be the best! How could ye fail?! I promise ye, Astrotrain – people will hear of this. Yer reputation will be worth dirt out in the spacelanes!"

Astrotrain stood up. He stood almost twice Cannonball's height and had no problem with using his height to intimidate the smaller Transformer. "My reputation began as dirt, Cannonball. I clawed my way up one battle at a time, one job at a time. If I have to do it all over again, I will!"

Cannonball stared straight into Astrotrain's optics, seemingly oblivious to the bounty hunter's greater size. "Get off of me ship." he said in a low, threatening tone.

Astrotrain said nothing more. He began to walk towards the door and the Mini-Cons followed.

Cannonball watched the group leave, not moving an inch. Some lesser Decepticons would have cowered or tried to repent for their failure, but not this one. He had to admit to himself that he held a certain degree of respect for Astrotrain, a respect that had not been dulled despite his failure to obtain the Force Chip.

Suddenly over his comm.-link the voice of Brushguard spoke. "Captain sir, would you come to my lab please? I have some interesting results for you."

Cannonball walked out of the room and the door made a clanking noise behind him.

Inside Brushguard's laboratory, he was giggling and occasionally banging his fist on a table out of sheer joy. He was given a special project, and the results were most enlightening so far.

He ran over from one control panel to the force field chamber he had set up on a nearby table. He bent down slightly, eyeing the object of his study with satisfaction and anticipation. The object floated in the force field, resembling a large, black crystal shard. Soon, he would unlock all the secrets for his Captain, and then the galaxy would know the power of the Decepticon pirate ship *Kalis' Lament* and the Dark Heart of *Sandokan*!

The End?

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