

# Star Trek: Independence The Machines of War

By Dnoth

*There is no instance of a country having benefited from prolonged warfare.*  
~Sun Tzu

## PROLOGUE

**Stardate: 54031.2 (12 January 2377)**

**USS Independence, Main Lounge**

**Sector 32981 (Unclaimed Space between the Federation and the Tamarian Republic)**

*"Captain's Log: We've been traveling rim ward, practically non-stop, for almost three months to return our Tamarian exchange officer.*

*We've left Federation space behind. Before us, is a region that has been explored very little. The crew is hoping Starfleet will cut us loose for awhile after we drop D'nas off and we can do some exploring. I must admit, the prospect of becoming an explorer is...something I've never really considered before."*

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"Jinal's," the *Independence's* lounge, had become rather popular since the re-launch of the vessel. It was named as a tribute to the fallen hero that saved thirty-eight crewmembers of Aurelia's previous ship.

At any given time, there were about 150 people onboard that were off-duty. Of those, half slept. A majority of the remaining 75 could often be found at "Jinal's." The lounge had a wide variety of games including: a dom-jot table, a pool table, darts, 3D chess, and a table in one corner for an old Earth game, Dungeons and Dragons. Luckily, *Steamrunners* sported a rather large lounge.

There was a group of officers and crew that created an impromptu band. It consisted of a Terran guitar and saxophone, a Risian lute, Caitain drums, and a Deltan harp. They played nearly every night. Unfortunately, they came

from different musical backgrounds and produced some type of mutation between Caitian classical and Terran jazz. All and all, it didn't sound too bad. It was at least...mellowing.

Unlike some other captains, Sintina Aurelia had no qualms about socializing with her crew. Though, she still struggled to make any real connections to her new subordinates. She was always one to make friends...and to trust...slowly. Once you got in her good graces, however, she would protect you veraciously; even to her own detriment.

Karim bin Nadal, the ship's new executive officer, knew all too well about his captain's quirks. He, along with Lieutenant Kimula, were the only people on the ship that Sintina had elevated to the level of 'friend.'

Everyone's emotions were erratic since the destruction of the former *Independence* and the loss of two-thirds of her crew. Sintina made every effort to keep her grief discreet, but didn't attempt to hide her contempt for the situation. She had been in a particularly sour mood for a few days now.

The trio all sat at a table; sipping drinks and listening to the music. Although, she was off-duty, Captain Aurelia never really internalized the concept of separating work from recreation. She leaned over to Karim, "Well, exec, you've had a few months to reevaluate our crew. What's your opinion?"

He smirked at the question and attempted to lighten the mood at the table, "I'm not used to all these science personnel."

Kimula, the Andorian counselor, chimed in, "Zian was telling me how happy he was to be in charge of an actual section; instead of just 3 people, like on the old *Indy*."

"The 'old *Indy*,' sighed Sintina, "is that what we're calling her now?"

Kimula and bin Nadal shared a glance, knowing their attempt to perk up Sintina failed, once again.

The captain elaborated, "I've commanded three ships, in two years. It doesn't bode well."

The Persian XO attempted to console her, "This is a good, sturdy ship. We have a fine crew. And we have a hell of a captain."

"Here, here," added the Andorian woman as she rose her glass.

Aurelia, however, continued to sulk, "Are you sure? My stubbornness got our 'old' ship destroyed along with a good part of her crew."

Kimula retorted, "Nonsense..."

"No, I mean it," plowed Sintina, "I only got my first command because it was wartime and Captain Camar died. Then, I was told to my face that the only reason I got that *Courageous*-class ship was because I was a non-thinking drone. Now, I get my third command due to the pity of an influential admiral. If it weren't for all that, I'd be a first officer still...at best."

The counselor had an edge to her words, "You're being too hard on yourself, Sintina. You've proven yourself against the Dominion, Cardassian insurgents, the Alshian...hell, we even bested a *Sovereign* under your leadership."

The talking up wasn't enough to bring Aurelia out of her funk, "A monkey could've been in charge of the 'old Indy' and won those battles." She listed off, "Since I assumed command of the *Midas*, I've lost two ships, alienated some of the most respected admirals and captains in the fleet, and let's face it, this whole mission to return D'nas is to get me out of peoples' hair."

"No," countered Karim, "it's to bring our profile down a little. It's to protect us." He added, "Besides, you personally saved the president's life. So you have at least a few powerful allies."

The captain unenthusiastically said, "Oh yeah, go me."

Kimula could take no more of Sintina's pouting. She puffed and began to shake her head. Then, addressed her captain, "Uh-uh, poor you." She raised her voice...a bit too much, "You're not the only one who lost something, or someone, you self-centered..." She managed to restrain her curse, but continued as she left her chair, "If that's really how you feel, request a demotion like Windslow did. At least, he stopped feeling sorry for himself."

She didn't give Aurelia a chance to respond. Kimula turned and stomped out of the room.

An uncomfortable silence followed between Karim and Sintina. The first officer cleared his throat and stared at his drink.

The captain finally offered, "It's your job to defend me against attacks like that now."

Somberly and deliberately, he got out of his seat as well and stated, "No, it's my job to make sure you hear it." He coolly walked away from the table, leaving Sintina alone.

Aurelia glanced about to see if anyone overheard the exchange. Luckily, no one seemed to notice...or knew enough to actively ignore it. She ran her fingers through her hair, got up, and headed for the exit as well.

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Sintina silently entered her quarters. The cabin was only lit by streaks of passing star light. She sat on the couch next to the windows and stared out into space. She sighed deeply, rested her head on her arm, and quietly said, "goddamnit."

## CHAPTER 1

### **Stardate: 54033.6 (13 January 2377) USS Independence, Main Engineering Sector 32981**

The type-V matter/anti-matter reactor had recently been replaced when the ship was at dry-dock. The vertically aligned core pulsed with a steady beat. While it was fully operational, every engineer knew it took months to 'fine tune' a new reactor.

The unique design of the *Steamrunner* produced some unique problems. Few Starfleet ships incorporated warp nacelles into the primary hull. Only *Saber*, *Defiant*, and *Steamrunner* classes had the feature. These vessels produced a distinctive warp field compared to ships with more traditional outboard nacelles. Also, warp stresses on the hull necessitated a certain amount of 'over-engineering.' Not to mention other particular traits that engineers at a ship yard don't consider...

"My room always glows red from the Bussard collector, Commander!" complained Doctor Zo'Kama.

Ethan Windslow regarded her with only a hint of annoyance as he rolled his stool to another station. "I'm sorry I haven't gotten to it yet, doctor."

"Not to mention," continued the Arkonian, "the medical concerns of prolonged exposure to all the particles they suck in."

Ethan rolled his eyes, "Doctor, the ramscoops only usually 'suck in' hydrogen. Besides which, the hull and SIF will protect the crew from anything dangerous we might collect."

The usually light-hearted, reptilian officer seemed unconvinced. She pressed, "And the light pollution?"

With a sigh, he conceded, "Alright, I'll have someone adjust the transparent aluminum to filter out the light from the collectors."

The Arkonian grinned, exposing a mouth of incisors, "Thank you, Commander." Having accomplished her goal, she turned and returned to her default setting of merriment and exited. Though, she was careful to make sure Windslow didn't see it.

As she left, Windslow allowed himself an inner joke involving crew quarters and red lights. A rare grin emerged. He quickly went back to work.

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Deck one of the *Steamrunner*-class *Independence* consisted of: the bridge, the captain's ready room, the conference lounge, a head, and a few storage lockers. The lounge was directly aft of the bridge and the ready room was starboard of it.

The bridge differed significantly from the command center on the former *Indy*. The executive officer or counselor didn't have a designated station on the bridge. Karim, however, often manned the mission operations post and since Kimula also served as the communications officer, it wasn't an issue. Instead of sharing the forward 'pit' with the helm, the tactical station was a free-standing post behind the captain's chair. There was a separate internal security station to the left of the tactical position.

Aurelia emerged from the turbolift...the crew new better than to announce her arrival. Tang Zian turned from the science station, "Good morning, ma'am."

She waved an acknowledging hand in the young officer's direction as she made her way to her office.

The Asian persisted, "Ma'am, I have a request."

Sintina paused, "And what's that, Lieutenant?"

He indicated to her to look at his display, "During the night shift, Ensign Chattopadhyay noticed something odd."

"What?" Sintina inquired.

Bringing up a scan result, Tang explained, "It's some huge metallic mass in interstellar space, 1.2 light years away. It's almost as big as Mars."

She leaned in, "Any guesses?"

The chief science officer vocalized what he had already considered, "Well, its way too small to be a Dyson's Sphere. And I doubt it's a natural phenomenon."

"Could it be a Borg Sphere?"

He shook his head, "I don't think so, Captain."

She looked over at him with a small smile, "You're just chomping at the bit to go investigate, aren't you?"

A smirk developed. "Yes, ma'am," he admitted.

The captain bobbed her head in consideration. She would have to make the transition from a war mindset to one of exploration eventually. Her curiosity wasn't peaked but seeing the desire for knowledge in Zian's eyes, and the fact they were ahead of schedule, persuaded her. "Oh, why not?" she concluded. She stood and looked to the helm, "D'nas, adjust course to intercept that...metal planet."

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Opposite Captain Aurelia's desk, sat a plush soft leather couch; Kimula plopped onto it, "You wanted to see me?"

Sintina looked up from a padd she was reading. She simply stated, "Thanks for the kick in the ass." She returned to the report, "Dismissed."

One of the Andorian's antenna popped up. She shook her head and found herself grinning with incredulity. She could tell Sintina had no intention of speaking to her further. ...It didn't matter; her outburst last night had the desired effect. Barely satisfied with her friend's version of an apology, Kimula walked out in silence.

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The double doors to main engineering parted for First Officer bin Nadal. He asked a passing crew member to point him in the direction of the chief engineer. Karim made his way to the lower level and found Lieutenant Commander Windslow partially hidden by the Jefferies tube he was in. "Commander."

Without looking to see who it was, the response came, "Yeah."

Bin Nadal squatted down so he could look into the tube, "Commander, Captain Aurelia wanted to schedule some ship wide tactical drills, but I wanted to know your maintenance schedule, so they don't conflict too much."

Ethan maneuvered to see Karim's face, "That's...considerate, Commander. I'll send it to you within the hour."

"Thanks."

Windslow ventured as bin Nadal began to rise, "How are you liking command?"

The XO admitted, "It's a pain to coordinate everybody." He returned the question, "How about you? How do you like being an engineer again?"

Still half hanging out the maintenance tube, "I don't regret the decision. It's where I belong."

Bin Nadal nodded. He hesitantly inserted, "I know you and I have had our disagreements in the past. I hope it doesn't interfere with our new working relationship."

The chief engineer averted his eyes for a moment but then rested them on his new superior, "You once told me that I didn't belong in the uniform. ...You were half right. I didn't belong in that red one. I'm not ashamed to admit that."

Karim absently examined the deck. He regretted being so judgmental. Yes, what Windslow did was inexcusable...but not necessarily unforgivable. He looked up with genuine concern on his face, "Have you had any trouble with anyone?"

Ethan knew the commander's meaning. Bin Nadal wanted to know if any of his engineers showed him disrespect due to his conviction of desertion and conduct unbecoming. The chief engineer bit his lip, "Some."

"Who?" Bin Nadal surprised himself at how quickly he came to his former first officer's aid.



Windslow was careful with his words, "With respect, I can handle it, sir."

Karim was split on what to do. Ultimately, he accepted his chief engineer's judgment, stood, and reluctantly left.

Commander Windslow took a long sigh...then, returned to work.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Supplemental USS Independence, Main Bridge Sector 32981**

Lieutenant Virak came over with the rest of the bridge crew from the last *Independence*. The ebony skinned Vulcan's board lit up with an indicator. She reported from behind the center seat. "We're in visual range of the rogue planet."

Sintina uncrossed her legs and sat up, "On screen."

The viewer came to life. A jagged, chrome-colored sphere hung in the depths. No lights emanated from it. Very little detail could be seen, but there was a huge crater on the surface. It didn't appear to be an impact crater...rather the remnants of an explosion from the bowels of the planet.

"Magnify and light enhance," ordered the captain. Despite herself, she became intrigued by the sight.

More details could now be seen. The surface consisted of buildings, deep abysses, and roadways. There was no movement. Everyone on the bridge gazed at screen.

Bin Nadal turned from the mission ops station, "What is it, Zian?"

Tang spun back to his station displays and began processing the information from the scans. "It looks like the entire planet was built up on a large asteroid," he reported. "...It has layers. Like they just kept on building new upon old until it got this massive. My scans are being hampered by widespread use of magnesite in the metals."

Aurelia, not understanding the significance of the magnesite, commented, "It looks abandoned."

"I agree," concurred Tang. "I'd guess its mean age is about ten million years."

Karim pondered aloud, "I wonder if it's always been here."

“No,” the science officer rejoined, “it’s moving at nearly 10 million KPH, relative to most of the stars in the galaxy. It could have had time to travel halfway around the Milky Way by now.”

“Can you trace back its trajectory?” came from Aurelia.

Tang did some calculations, “Assuming it’s been at a constant speed, somewhere in star cluster 3478-H in the Gamma Quadrant.”

A small smirk emerged on Aurelia’s face. She began to feel a sensation. It was the excitement of exploration, she determined. *‘I could get used to this’* She turned to address her science officer, “What conditions should an away team expect?”

“Ma’am?” immediately objected bin Nadal.

Zian ignored the first officer, “We couldn’t transport down due to the magnesite.”

Karim stepped closer, “It interferes with sensors and transporters?”

“Yes sir.”

The Persian gave a disapproving look to his captain. He knew Sintina saw it, but she persisted.

“How about surface conditions?”

“EVA suits would be required,” he elaborated. “Gravity is one-half G. ...It has a thin atmosphere of helium and other interstellar gases that it’s probably pick up along its journey. The temperature is about 150 degrees below zero.”

Karim was less subtle this time. He walked close to Sintina and whispered, “If something happens, we won’t be able to beam up the away team.”

She looked over and mused, “You weren’t this uptight when you were a security officer.”

He quickly came back with, “Sure I was.”

Aurelia dismissed his concerns, “We’ll be fine.”

“We?”

The captain made her way to the turbolift, “Tang, D’nas, Virak, you’re with me.”

Bin Nadal said as forcefully as he could without causing a scene, “Ma’am. It’s inappropriate for you to lead the away team.”

Sintina obviously anticipated his response. She continued walking, “It’s a dead planet, what could happen?”

Karim debated to dissuade her, but doubted he could. It was just like Sintina to jump into the thick of any excitement she could find. He wondered if he could ever train her to be a ‘stay-at-home’ captain. Defeated, he grabbed Virak for a moment and said, “You’re responsible for her safety, Lieutenant.”

The Vulcan female somberly curtsied, “Of course, sir.”

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The type-eight shuttlecraft flew low over the crumbled, metallic surface of the planet. It was obvious a conflict occurred there. All of the structures were in disrepair. Some had large chunks missing from them.

Aurelia and Tang manned the consoles; Virak and D’nas were in the aft compartment.

The four members of the away team wore the standard issue Extra-Vehicular Activity suits, minus the helmets and gloves.

A light flashed on Tang’s board. He reported, “Now that we’re closer, I’m picking up a few faint energy sources scattered on the planet.”

D’nas, the Tamarian exchange officer, spoke up, “What type of energy?”

The Asian science officer worked his station, “I’m not sure. They’re barely reregistering with all the interference from the magnesite. It could be something left over from what ever civilization used to live here.”

Virak hypothesized, “Could they be mines or weapons?”

He shrugged, “I really can’t tell. It could be something as harmless as a power generator of some type.”

The exchange officer chimed in, "It's a testament to who ever built this that there are any energy signatures left at all, after all this time."

"You don't think anyone has taken up residence here, do you?" questioned the captain.

"I don't see how, ma'am," offered Tang, "I can't imagine anything surviving on that planet, unless it had a lot more power than I'm reading."

Settling in to her new role as explorer, Sintina concluded, "Well, one way to find out." She looked over at Zian, "Where do you recommend we set down?"

He glanced at his display, "The power signatures appear to be concentrated in the polar regions."

"Ok, heading for the nearest pole," commented Aurelia as she manipulated her console.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Supplemental Shuttlecraft Welker Uncharted Planet**

The magnetic seal of the shuttlecraft hatch broke and it slowly lowered to the ground with a clang. The away team exited, now fully adorned in their EVA suits. Each suit had an external audio receiver in addition to the com link. The team's boots grabbed the metal surface slightly with each step.

Beyond the movement of the team, there was no sound. The only light came from the suits, the shuttle, or the distant stars. They were surrounded by structures of various shapes and sizes; all in different stages of collapse. They landed on, what probably had been, some type of roadway. Now, it was littered with debris and pot-marked. The holes exposed some type of circuitry and another space under the road. Despite the damage, the structure seemed stable.

The young Tamarian officer slowly took in his surroundings. The chrome landscape was spectacular against the backdrop of the space. He uttered, "It's beautiful."

Aurelia saw it from another perspective, "Whoever was here certainly trashed the place."

D'nas finished her captain's thought, "Most likely, they destroyed themselves."

"Not necessarily," commented the Virak, the only security officer present, "They could have been raided...they could have fled. There is not enough information to come to a conclusion."

Zain allowed himself to look up from his scans for the first time, "Can you imagine the structural engineering required to build this place?"

Captain Aurelia noticed something etched into a nearby structure. She walked closer. "Tang, come here."

The lieutenant joined her seconds later. He didn't have to ask what she wanted. The etchings seemed to be some type of glyphs.

"Can you translate the markings on the building?" she asked.

He was already running them through the translation matrix via his tricorder. "It reads: Kaon cosmotron production facility two." He surmised, "I guess Kaon is where we are...and I have no idea what a cosmotron might be." The officer began to add up all the information he'd gathered to this point and ventured, "If I were to guess, I'd say this whole planet served as a massive factory."

"Producing what?" inquired the Vulcan security chief.

Zian's head shook in his helmet, "I don't know, yet."

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A shadow moved quickly and effortlessly in the darkness.

<Ravage reporting. The unknown craft has landed 3.68 decavun's due east of Kolkular.>

<Acknowledged. Perform further reconnaissance.>

<Confirmed. Proceeding.>

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Karim sat uncomfortably in the command chair. He was annoyed at Sintina. As leader of the away team, she should've reported by now. He ordered Kimula to open a channel. "*Independence* to away team."

"*Aurelia here.*"

Her voice was too innocent. Karim considered if she was deliberately trying to agitate him by not following protocols. "Just wanted to check on your status, Captain."

"*We're about ready to investigate some power signatures. Are you picking them up?*"

The lieutenant commander looked over to the science officer on duty. The ensign indicated a negative. "No ma'am."

*"The tricorders can't pick them up, either. The shuttle must have the right combination of sensitivity and proximity."*

The first officer added, "I'd like to recommend a regular report interval." He knew the request would be interpreted as a complaint about her lack of communication. In the pause before her response, Karim was sure she rolled her eyes.

*"Fine. You'll hear from me every ten minutes."*

"Thank you, ma'am," bin Nadal responded, *"Independence out."*

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Other than the very slight hum servos, it advanced smoothly and quietly. The constant darkness wasn't an issue for the machine. Its red optical sensors could process information in the absence of light. Ravage's navigational systems calculated every step, every leap. It tracked its prey with cold efficiency.

The cat-like creature crawled to the edge of the roof and observed the movement below. The main threat didn't seem to be sentient. The other four had appendages and seemed to move with purpose. Ravage couldn't determine if they were biological, technological, or some combination of the two.

<Visual confirmation. The craft held four occupants. The vessel does not appear to be an Autonomous.>

<Do not underestimate the vessel. It could a rebel returning from exile. Do you see a brand on it?>

<Negative. Request authorization to engage.>

<Authorization granted. Reinforcements are en-route to your location. ETA: 1.2 cycles.>

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All four members of the away team were now several meters from the shuttle. Aurelia and Tang continued to examine a building. D'nas collected samples for a metallurgical analysis. Virak stood vigil over the other three.



The Vulcan decided to bring up a topic she considered more urgent. "Lieutenant Tang, have you been able to localize the source of the power signatures you detected earlier?"

He turned, "Not yet, I got distracted with these hieroglyphs." The Asian began moving to the craft, "I'll need to use the shuttle's sensors."

As he neared it, a pair of rockets came from seemingly nowhere. Both hit the shuttle in rapid succession. The resulting explosion flung the science officer into the air. He landed some distance away and rolled to a stop. He didn't get up.

The fireball didn't exist long in the absence of oxygen. What was left was a half-melted hulk.

Once the shrapnel was no longer a threat, Aurelia and Virak drew their hand phasers and surveyed the area. D'nas ran, as fast as his suit would allow, to aid Tang.

"Where the hell'd that come from!" blurted Aurelia.

The response was more reserved, yet trepidation could be heard in Virak's voice, "I'm not sure, ma'am."

In mid-step, D'nas got plowed down by some massive force and it pinned him to the ground. He didn't know what it was but he called out, "Help! Get it off me! Get it off me!"

Both Virak and Sintina heard the cries over their headsets. They turned to see...what looked like a large black and silver cat on top of the helm officer.

Aurelia ran toward the scene, but her magnetic boots slowed her progress.

Virak used a bit more ingenuity. She deactivated her boots and moved with an otherwise unnatural gait.

The Tamarian struggled futilely against the robotic beast. The creature now clamped down with its jaws on his helmet. He heard its artificial growl. The monster's fangs left circular cracks in his visor. The sound of the fracturing only served to engulf him in panic. He flapped about helplessly against the heavy machine.

Sintina decided to stop her approach and leveled her phaser. She fired and hit the mechanical cat. The response was not what she hoped for. It only looked at her with its piercing, red eyes and made a synthetic roar. The captain quickly determined, "Stun doesn't work."

The pressure against D'nas' chest from the robot's paw prevented him from breathing. Long cracks now ran across his field of vision.

The Vulcan reactivated her boots in mid leap and was pulled the metallic road. She adjusted her phaser to level 12, enough to disrupt ultra-dense alloys. She aimed carefully and discharged the weapon.

This time, it achieved the desired result. The cat was hit in the side and it created some type of digitized howl. The phaser beam left a three centimeter hole in the automaton's armor. It immediately jumped off D'nas and retreated to the shadows.

Virak reached the Tamarian first. He propped himself up with his elbows, but she instructed him to lay down for the moment and relax. Tang still lay motionless a few meters away.

The captain activated her long-range communicator, "Aurelia to *Indy*!"

*"Independence..."*

"We've been attacked. The shuttle's gone, Tang and D'nas are injured. We need extraction, now!"

There was no hesitation in the reply, *"You've got it. I'm dispatching a shuttle now. I'm also going to move into geosynchronous orbit and keep a visual on you."*

"The sooner the better, this planet is defiantly not dead yet."

*"Understood, I'll leave this line open"*

Aurelia joined Virak. The two made a perimeter around the wounded. "What do you think that thing was?" she asked.

The tactical officer guessed, "Perhaps an automated defense system."

“What the hell was I thinking,” the captain chided herself, “going into what I knew was a former war zone.”

The Vulcan only observed, “It would not be the first time the machines of war outlasted their users.”

“What’s that?” came from D’nas.

“I feel it too,” concurred Virak.

The Latino captain could feel it now as well. It was a slight vibration on the road. It grew.

Sintina assumed the worst, “We need to find a more defensible position.”

“Agreed. However, I don’t think we have time to...”

A large vehicle rounded a distant corner. It was a type of treaded tank. It was purple in color and the cannon atop it rotated in their direction.

Aurelia’s stomach fell, “Aww, *mierda*.”

## CHAPTER 4

### **Supplemental USS Independence, Main Bridge In Orbit of an Unnamed Planet**

Bin Nadal heard the profanity over the line. "Captain, what it it?"

Sintina ignored the question. She had other priorities. Her voice could still be heard, however. *"Virak, get Tang out of here! D'nas, cover them."*

*"What about you, Captain?"*

*"Don't worry about me. Get the hell outta here!"*

Karim jumped in, "Captain, don't anything stupid." He grimaced once he realized how that came out.

*"Too late,"* was the response.

He felt so useless. The Persian attempted raise his captain's hopes. "The recovery team should be there in a few minutes and the *Indy* should have line of sight to you momentarily."

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The tank rolled closer. It would surely have heavier armor than that cat-thing. Sintina took cover behind some rubble and ramped up her type-two phaser to level sixteen, maximum. The rumble became more intense.

The captain saw her three crewmembers find a good position about a hundred meters away, out of sight of the tank. The concealment wouldn't last...not for her...not for the others. She had a choice to make. These defense system robots probably wouldn't react to diplomacy. The only way to delay this thing would be to engage it; distract it. The tank wasn't far now. Sintina closed her eyes and took one deep breath as she grasped her phaser. Then, she rose up and shot the machine.

The beam of phased energy took a satisfying chunk out of the vehicle's hull. A gooey blue substance leaked out of the wound.

The tank almost immediately returned fire with its main gun, which expelled a plasma burst. The plasma struck the pile of scrap Sintina hid behind. She, and the rest of the debris, hurtled away from the explosion. Luckily, none of the fragments compromised her suit.

Virak witnessed Captain Aurelia land with a dull thud on the metal deck. The Vulcan debated whether to leave D'nas and Tang, or to aid her.

If it hadn't been for the helmet, Sintina was sure she would've been dead. With a cough, she pushed herself up. She looked directly at the tank now. It seemed to look at her. She realized she was at the mercy of this thing. She had no cover and no doubt had a cracked bone or two. God only knew where her phaser had flown to.

With a jolt, the tank rushed forward. It was heading directly for Aurelia.

*"It's not going to bother shooting me,"* Sintina grimly thought. She struggled to fight the pain, but with her injured body, she wouldn't be able to move fast enough.

When the vehicle was mere meters away, pieces of it began to shift. It turned into a mass of moving parts. It happened so quickly, Sintina found herself staring intently to catch some of the details of what was happening to it. It was a blur of clanking metal. A new form took shape; a humanoid form.

The captain didn't even fully register what just occurred when she found herself in the grip of this...huge thing. It lifted her up to its 'face,' which consisted of a single red beacon.

The UT wasn't used, somehow the creature spoke Federation standard. Its voice seemed almost...regal, "I am Shockwave, guardian of Cybertron. Explain your purpose here, flesh creature!"

Sintina was still in shock. Her mind raced to catch up to current events. She uttered, "United Fed...Explorers..."

"Insufficient!" it barked.

A phaser blast shredded into Shockwave's left shoulder, causing the nearly ten meter tall machine to step back to regain his balance. He quickly found the hostile target, another bio-intruder. He brought around his right arm,

which lacked a 'hand,' but instead boasted the same plasma cannon that shot at Aurelia earlier.

For a fleeting moment, Virak was pleased with herself. The colossal machine seemed damaged. It didn't take long, however, for her to conclude she took the wrong course of action. It recovered quickly...too quickly. "*Dakh'uh pthak*," she had time to say. It was one of Surak's teachings. It meant: cast out fear. The last thing she saw was a bright light.

Aurelia watched as the body of her chief tactical officer scattered into various chunks of tissue. "God damn you!" she cursed.

The giant robot's feet clanked as he stepped. He took a look at Virak's remains, "Disgusting." He returned his focus to Aurelia, "There were two others. Where are they?"

"Kiss my ass!" responded an infuriated Sintina.

Shockwave's 'hand' was more of a four taloned claw. It squeezed Sintina. She cried out as the vice began to crush her already battered body.

"Flesh creatures," the giant began, "It's difficult to believe we were once subservient to pathetic organisms such as yourself." He eased his grip. <Cyclonus, I've found biological beings trespassing on Cybertron. Orbit the planet. They might be part of a larger force.>

<Very well, I'll take some Seekers and patrol.>

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"Sir, we have a visual on the away team's position," reported Petty Officer Dorian from operations.

Karim jumped up, "On screen!"

The screen revealed more of the same, as far as this planet was concerned: ruins. Then, he saw movement...something...walking.

"Zoom in," he commanded. Bin Nadal's eyes grew as the realization of what he was seeing sank in. "My god." He looked aft, "Can the computer visually identify where our people are?"

Chief of the Boat, Hatora of J'bel, manned tactical. "Yes sir. I'll highlight their positions."

Three yellow circles appeared on the main viewer: one in direct contact with the large automaton and two next to each other several meters away.

Kimula voiced the question first, "Where's the fourth member of the team?"

The Illyrian NCO answered the question with a reverent shake of the head.

The first officer began brainstorming, "Can we take that thing out without harming our own people?"

The chief consulted the computer for a moment, "We'd have to narrow the beams, adjust the power settings, and we'd have to be spot on the mark. ...It'd take a few minutes to set up, sir."

"Do it," ordered Karim. He then looked at Dorian, "How long until the extraction team is on the ground?"

"Two more minutes, sir."

The Persian returned to the image before him. The mechanical creature turned the corner. It was walking closer to the two other crew members. "Not fast enough," he mumbled to himself.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Supplemental Near the Fortress of Kolkular State of Kaon, Cybertron**

D'nas hid just inside a damaged structure. Tang was starting to become conscious. He saw what happened to Virak. The Tamarian still had his phaser, but doubted it would do anything other than give away their location. The machine walked closer. It held the captain in its one hand. The situation seemed hopeless. He ran through his options: do nothing and hope the robot passes them by...or...use the phaser. Not to attack the giant, but to put the captain out of her misery; followed by Tang and himself. The latter was perfectly noble in Tamarian civilization.

The vibration of the footfalls became louder. The exchange officer heard movement...not from outside, but from inside the abandoned building. He swung his phaser around in the direction of the clatter. *'Was the cat-thing back?'* D'nas desperately tried to calm his breathing.

Shockwave scanned very carefully as he moved. The thought of these vile little creatures polluting his beloved Cybertron sickened him. It wasn't the first time biologics trespassed. Most, like this one, claimed to be exploring. 'Exploring,' in his mind, was simply another word for prospecting. Some foolish flesh creatures even attempted to openly conquer his home. Only to be driven out by his forces. The rebels, on the other hand, never defended Cybertron from these intruders. More often than not, the biologics were working with the insurrectionists.

Sintina began to rein in her emotions. She felt totally impotent against the machine. Her mind raced to think of someday...anyway to regain some measure of control over the situation. In a desperate bid to save her crew, she offered, "They're already gone. We have the technology to transport matter through an energy conversion process."

"A clever ploy, fleshling," Shockwave responded, "that technology is not unique. It is not by chance that Cybertron is rich in magnesite."

*"Damn it."* The cold, metal claw clinched around her suit as punishment. She blurted, "Why not just kill me!?"



He didn't like suffering the noises the insect made. The response came, none the less. "You may have information about the commercial brand. If you volunteer it to me, I might let you leave."

Aurelia hesitated, not knowing how best to play her cards...or lack thereof. Shockwave's attention, however, seemed to have focused on a meter tall hole in the side of the building next to them. The massive machine took a knee and probed the hole with his cannon. After a moment, he withdrew it, stood, aimed the plasma weapon at the breach. He said, "I heard you in there. Come out or I will destroy you."

D'nas was forced to drag Tang away from the opening as the barrel of the cannon came through the hole. In the process, he tripped over some debris and caused a small commotion. Now, he held the phaser and debated. He wasn't sure if he could bring himself to kill his captain and friend. A new option came to him. If he set his phaser to overload, the explosion might be enough to disable the creature. He knew of only one way to get it close enough to cause maximum damage. Tang rustled, but wasn't quite awake yet.

D'nas set the phaser. It would take about 15 seconds for it to build up enough power to explode. Through his sacrifice, perhaps his Federation allies could escape. Then, he put the weapon back into its holster and began to move to the breach.

Several bright lights turned on from the shadows inside the building. Some type of engine could be heard and the lights headed for the hole. It was some type of heavy utility vehicle. It gained speed quickly and rammed right through the already damaged wall. The black 'truck' didn't stop. Instead it collided directly with Shockwave's left foot, causing him to topple.

Only then did the truck shift in shape, revealing another humanoid robot. It sported much smaller plasma cannons on each forearm. It leveled both arms at the fallen Shockwave. "Why don't you pick on someone half your size!" it boasted.

"Trailbreaker," Shockwave rejoined, "you've always talked too much." He brought his arm cannon to bear and fired. The plasma burst slammed into Trailbreaker's right arm, causing him to spin to the hard, metal ground.

D'nas observed the may lay. He nearly forgot about his phaser. Quickly, he stopped the energy build up and took aim.

Shockwave's joints whined in protest, but he managed to sit up. He was assaulted again, this time by another fleshling. The weapon burned through his left forearm and he lost control over one of his fingers. The insect in his hand might escape. *'Enough of these games,'* he thought. He aimed his cannon directly at the biologic.

Sintina, fighting off the vertigo she received from the robot's fall, still found herself in the grip of the metal monster. Hope came to her, however, as the pressure from one of the talons eased. She desperately tried to force the claw open.

The Tamarian saw how this would play out. He would be dead soon. *'At least, I can prevent the captain from being tortured.'* He pointed at Sintina.

A missile struck Shockwave dead center in his torso. Only Aurelia's suit protected her from the heat of the blast.

A red hovercar jumped off a nearby rooftop. While in free fall, it converted into humanoid form and landed on its feet with a heavy thud. It aimed its...what D'nas considered to be an oversized...plasma rifle at Shockwave. "This is for Sun Streaker, you Decepticon slag!"

Trailbreaker got back up, a glowing, blue gelatin flowing from his damage. He looked up to see two craft in the sky. He didn't have to ask what they were. "We can't stay here, Sideswipe. Dirge and Skywarp are almost in range. Evacuate those two biologics." He indicated D'nas and Tang. "I'll take care of Shockwave."

"But..." protested the red automaton.

"Now, before we both get blown to bits!" ordered the taller robot.

Reluctantly, Sideswipe backed down. He moved closer to D'nas. "Get in," he said evenly, "and bring that other one with you." Without another word, the machine reverted back to its hovercar mode and opened its hatch.

The young Tamarian stood in shock for several moments. Again, the 'car' prodded him to enter. Seeing no other alternatives, he did as he was instructed. D'nas collected up Tang with relative ease and maneuvered his friend into the vehicle.

Trailbreaker walked toward the damaged Shockwave. The Decepticon seemed to be in status-lock, an emergency repair mode. It was the closest thing to a coma that Cybertronians could experience. The black machine trained the weapons on his good arm on the larger robot. The biological being in Shockwave's hand stopped struggling. No doubt the creature was trying to figure out his intentions. He had already scanned their small 'tricorder' devices and downloaded its language. "It's alright," Trailbreaker offered, "we're not going to hurt you."

Sintina, not yet out of Shockwaves clutches, simply nodded. It was then, the two fightercraft, the black one referred to as 'Dirge' and 'Skywarp,' opened fire. Plasma bursts fell all around them. She looked over at where D'nas and Tang were. The red hovercar was already on the move.

The 'friendly,' black one leaned over Shockwave to get Sintina. When he did, the former tank, stuck his cannon into Trailbreaker's frame. Shockwave's head went up, "Do you not understand the concept of deception, Autobot?" The Decepticon fired. The force of the blast pushed Trailbreaker several meters into the air. The lifeless machine landed back on Shockwave. The purple robot pushed the Autobot hulk off him as he stood. He regarded his captive, "Now why would they care about you so much?"

The hope had ended as quickly as it came. Sintina could only look up. She imagined in her mind's eye, photon torpedoes raining down on her location. It was a scenario prayed for. Death would be preferable than being totally helpless. Her dream never came.

The fighters strafed overhead. Shockwave communicated, <Dirge, track Sideswipe. Skywarp, intercept the incoming alien small craft. Cyclonus, report.>

*<I've found their mothership. I'm waiting for more Seekers before we attack.>*

<Acknowledged. I'm returning to Kolkular for repairs with one of the flesh creatures.>

The Cybertronian guardian moved slowly to his destination. One of his feet dragged slightly.

## CHAPTER 6

### **Supplemental USS Independence, Main Bridge In Orbit of Cybertron**

Everyone on the bridge was transfixed to the events unfolding on the viewer. After only a slight pause, Karim went into action. "I want that...hovercar and the purple one tracked visually."

"Aye sir," confirmed Hatora.

Kimula reported from communications, "Karim, the rescue shuttle says they're under attack."

"Patch me through to 'em." An indicator tone sounded, "*Independence* to recovery team, what's your status?"

*"Our shields are holding against the plasma weapons, but if we lower them to make the extraction, no one will make it back."*

The first officer considered. "Understood, the situation has changed. Come back home. We have to regroup and figure out what's happening down there."

*"Aye sir, returning to ship."*

"Sir," started the chief, "the purple tank-thing has gone into a heavily armored complex. I've lost contact."

"Damn...what about D'nas and Tang?"

Hatora checked, "The vehicle they're in is traveling out of the area in a north-north westerly direction at nearly 200 kilometers per hour."

Bin Nadal nodded, "Keep an eye on that complex and try to get some decent scans."

"Yes sir."

Karim then addressed Kimula, "Do we still have an open line to the captain?"

"No sir, the structure is now blocking the transmission."

He puffed and ordered, "Try to hail Tang and D'nas."

\*\*\*\*\*

Tang slowly became aware that he was moving...more like gliding. He looked up out of the overhead window. Several damaged bridges and structures passed his field of vision. They were moving pretty fast. He looked over to see D'nas, in a damaged EVA suit, sitting in a chair next to him. D'nas looked at him somberly, "You're not going to believe this," he said.

\*\*\*\*\*

<Scourge, take point,> commanded the purple and silver fighter, Cyclonus.

<Why me?> responded bulkier, light blue craft.

<Because I said so, coward! You aren't intimidated by the fleshling's ship, are you?>

<No! It's just...shouldn't you be leading from the front? You *are* second in command of our forces...> started Scourge.

Cyclonus corrected with reverence, <No, I'm third in command after Megatron and Shockwave.>

Thundercracker, another blue interceptor, broke in, <Megatron hasn't been around in four million years. He probably abandoned us for some energy rich world.>

<You will not speak of such things again, Thundercracker!> blared the group's leader, <Megatron will return with enough energy to bring Cybertron back into a golden age!>

Ramjet, a white and red fighter, ended the tangent with, <Don't we have bigger things to worry about?>

<Indeed,> concurred Cyclonus, <Accelerate to attack speed!>

Despite his objections, Scourge still found himself taking point.

\*\*\*\*\*

The tactical station lit up with contacts. Hatora reported, "Sir, we have a new problem."

Karim looked back and gave a 'you've got to be kidding me' look.

The Chief of the Boat continued, "Seven fightercraft heading our way."

"Is the recovery shuttle back yet?"

Hatora nodded, "It just docked."

Bin Nadal gave a sigh of relief and requested, "Tactical assessment."

The Illyrian cracked a smirk, "If they come at us with the same weaponry they attacked the shuttle with..." He shook his head, "They won't have a chance. They don't have any shields to speak of and their plasma cannons are about as powerful as what Earth's Starfleet had in the early 22<sup>nd</sup> century."

The news prompted an evil grin from the first officer, "Time for a little pay back. Target the lead fighter."

\*\*\*\*\*

Scourge knew the most dangerous phase of the attack was about to begin: the rush to the intruder. If he could only get close, the huge vessel probably wouldn't be able to target him. If need be, he could transform, land on the hull, and rip the ship apart with his bare hands.

The alien vessel held station. Six thousand kilovuns...two thousand...in firing range. He opened up. A dotted trail of plasma pulses hurtled toward the flesh creatures' ship. Just when they were about to make contact...they seemed to impact on some type of energy shield. Cyclonus' decision to have him take the lead now made sense.

Then, Scourge noticed something else from the ventral side of the ship. A long strip along its hull began to glow red from its ends. Two lights met in the middle of the strip.

Some distance behind Scourge, Cyclonus witnessed the beam of phased energy nearly vaporize his subordinate.

<Their hull is protected by an energy barrier!> reported Thundercracker.

<That's what I was afraid of,> was the reply from his leader.

Blitzwing, a member of their attack squadron, was the second to be annihilated by the organic's vessel.

Ramjet and Thundercracker managed to strafe the huge ship, but it made little difference. Their attacks were easily absorbed by the forcefield.

Thundercracker, the blue fighter, pleaded, <Cyclonus, we have to retreat!>

The task force leader observed a third Seeker turn into a brief fireball. He reluctantly signaled the withdraw order. He was able to scan the vessel, however. The mission hadn't been a total failure.

\*\*\*\*\*

"They're backing off...they're returning to the planet," triumphantly reported the chief.

Karim felt rather proud as well, "Damage report."

"Shields holding at 92 percent," was the response.

The first officer watched as the remaining four fighters flew away. "Come back anytime."

## CHAPTER 7

### **Supplemental USS Independence, Conference Lounge In Orbit of Cybertron**

After the attack, Karim bin Nadal gathered his resources in a hastily convened meeting. He sat at the head of the curved, black marble-topped table.

In addition to being the chief engineer, Ethan Windslow held the title of second officer. He sat on Karim's right. Zo'Kama, the ship's doctor, as well as Kimula and Chief Hatora were present.

"The good news is: Tang and D'nas seem to be safe for the moment." Karim tapped his compin, "Can you hear me, Mr. D'nas?"

The audio activated. *"Yes sir, I'm here."*

The Arkonian doctor immediately cut in, "What's Lieutenant Tang's condition?"

The science officer's voice could be heard over the line, *"I'm fine, doctor. Sore...but fine. I just got knocked out. I might have a concussion. I don't know."*

"Do you have a med-kit?" she inquired as a slight look of annoyance crossed the first officer's face.

*"No. It was in the shuttle."*

With a huff, the reptilian yielded to bin Nadal.

The Persian instinctively seemed to address the ceiling. "Has the...car you're in told you where it's taking you?"

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In Sideswipe's cabin, D'nas saw a small display screen come to life. It showed a map and what appeared to be a travel plan. It came simultaneously with its explanation.



A slightly synthetic voice said, "Our forward scout post; it's 41 kilometers from here on an azimuth of 004 if my current direction is the reference plane. We should be there in 12 minutes. ...Any other questions?"

D'nas and Tang still didn't quite know what to make of their situation. There was a silent concern in both their minds. Their rescue felt a bit like a kidnapping...or a set up. After an uneasy pause, the Tamarian prompted, "Did you receive that, sir?"

\*\*\*\*\*

"Yes." bin Nadal rejoined. "We'll make that our landing spot. The bridge will continue to monitor this line. Take care of yourselves."

*"Understood, sir."*

The first officer transferred the communication back to the bridge. He immediately commented, "Just because one faction seems to be friendly doesn't mean I trust them." He looked at his senior chief, whom had over twenty years of security experience, "I want to take as many precautions as practical, Chief."

Hatora picked it up, "We'll do a fly over of the area before we set down. We can also come much better prepared than the original away team did. I recommend a full load out: tactical EVA suits, phaser rifles, photon grenade launchers. If those things try anything, we'll at least be able to fight back."

The Andorian counselor leaned in, "It's a shame we don't have any fighters anymore."

"There's no point in wishing for things we don't have. Besides, the Type-10's are the next best thing to fighters," responded Windslow.

Bin Nadal refocused the group, "We'll take two shuttles. A Type-10 will provide cover for the landing team." He turned to Zo'Kama, "Doctor, you're coming with me in the landing party." Next, he addressed the NCO, "Chief, I want you piloting the support craft." Then, to Windslow, "Commander, you'll be in charge up here. Be ready to provide us artillery fire. We'll decide our COA to recover Captain Aurelia if we get Tang and D'nas back without a problem." He stood, "Let's go."

\*\*\*\*\*

The Tamarian exchange officer had been ignoring the lateral, hairline crack that ran across his visor. Some motion caught his attention out the right window. Another white 'car' had pulled up beside them. It was much boxier than Sideswipe. D'nas sat up with a start, "What's that other vehicle?"

Sideswipe vocalized, "Don't worry about him. He's with me."

\*\*\*\*\*

The new car transmitted, <What happened to Trailbreaker?>

<I'm not sure. He wanted me to get these sentients safe. I couldn't go back for him.>

<Kup will understand,> was the somber response.

<Hold on, one of these creatures is asking questions about you. Tap into my com system. You can answer it yourself.>

\*\*\*\*\*

"Does it have a humanoid form like you?" asked Tang. Any tenderness from his injuries was now pushed far from his mind. His fear was overshadowed by his curiosity. For all intents and purposes, for the first time since he joined Starfleet, he could be a *real* explorer.

A different voice entered the cabin. I seemed a bit more mature sounding than Sideswipe's, "Of course I do."

"What are you...you robots?" piped up D'nas.

"Autonomous Robots to be precise, I'm called Wheeljack," responded the new voice.

From Wheeljack's tone, Lieutenant Tang made a supposition, "Autonomous Robots? ...Is that like a...a brand name?"

"These fleshlings catch on quick, uh, Wheeljack?" sarcastically observed Sideswipe.

The other vehicle professionally elaborated, "Autonomous Robotics was a manufacturing line for our creators, the Quintessons. We prefer the term, Autobot."

D'nas blurted untactically, "Sideswipe...Wheeljack...both seem like odd names."

Again, Wheeljack fielded the observation, "In our society, names aren't permanent. They are sometimes given as a reflection of your actions or attitudes."

Zian added, "That's not uncommon, D'nas. Some American Indian tribes from Earth do the same thing."

"Back in his day, 'Swipe was a pretty good racer," taunted Wheeljack.

"Back in my day?" repeated the sleeker vehicle with mock indignation. "I can beat you without straining a servo."

A laugh was heard, "Of course you can. I'm too busy fixing everyone else to optimize my own systems."

Sideswipe chided, "Cry me a river, as the human saying goes."

The science officer shuffled in his seat, "How do you know that saying?"

"I've been downloading information from your tricorder's database," the sporty car casually responded.

Suddenly feeling violated, Zian said, "You shouldn't do that. Some of that information is sensitive." He immediately questioned his decision to confront the powerful alien robot about it.

The Autobot engineer offered, "You'll have to forgive us. It's just easier for us to get information about you that way."

"It is better to plead for forgiveness than beg for permission, right Zian?" prompted Sideswipe.

Not sure how to respond, Tang drifted off, "Well..."

Fortunately, D'nas took the conversation to another topic, "So are there factions of Autobots? Is that why that cat and purple-thing attacked us?"

The question quickly elicited a reaction from the sleek machine, "Aww, I should kick you out right now for calling that hunk of scrap an Autobot."

Wheeljack took a much less combative approach, "What Sideswipe means to say is, the commercial line are the only ones referred to as Autobots now. There was another Quintesson product of military robots. We've called them Decepticons ever since they launched a sneak attack against Kaon nearly 9 million years ago."

"And you've been at war with the military line ever since?" asked Tang.

"That's right," came from Wheeljack.

Sideswipe corrected, "War...hell. We're just trying to survive at this point."

Tang wanted to follow up on the statement, but the Tamarian spoke up first.

"What ever happened to your creators, the Quintessons?"

The racer answered with pride, "We overthrew our slave masters long before the Great War. They're probably extinct by now."

The exchange officer rejoined, "You were slaves?"

"Products...servants...slaves," began the white vehicle, "Pick your term. Both Autobots and Decepticons were sold to all kinds of species, for all types of reasons."

Sideswipe added, "Until we forced the Quints to flee Cybertron."

Tang questioned, "So what caused this 'Great War?'"

"Typically, the military brand robots are bigger, stronger," explained Wheeljack, "They decided they were superior to the commercial brand...and set out to take over the planet."

The conversation stalled for a moment after the revelation. A few seconds later, Wheeljack volunteered, "Where almost at the rally point. Our cell's commander, Kup, is waiting for us there."

## CHAPTER 8

### **Supplemental** **The Fortress of Kolkular** **The State of Kaon, Cybertron**

Fortress Kolkular was a large, elevated, domed complex. Kaon and its fortress capitol were the first places on the planet to be secured once the military took their rightful place as stewards of Cybertron.

Shockwave reflected somberly about those early days as he entered the heart of Decepticon territory. All Cybertronians celebrated the end of Quintesson tyranny, but which brand did most of the work? Which brand suffered the most losses? ...The Guardians...the Decepticons.

It wasn't long before the 'civilians' wanted to control the actions of the military. Why should the commercial brand have any say over a prize they did not win? Megatron was the first to make the Guardians see how the military had removed one master, only to fight another.

The massive Decepticon entered the space bridge control room. The space bridge itself hadn't been used in eons. It had been an invention of the Golden Age of Cybertron. Energy for the war effort drained their resources, however. Now, there wasn't enough energy on the whole planet to activate the space-folding device. The control room had become Shockwave's personal lair. Most of the time he, like most Cybertronians, sat idly in standby mode.

A few times a century, something required his attention. Occasionally, an Autobot would be detected. He would organize an attack party. Sometimes the rebel would be destroyed...sometimes the Autobot would escape.

Neither the Decepticons nor the Autobots had the energy to launch a respectable offensive. The Cybertronians spent most of their active time desperately searching for any remaining energy sources on the planet.

In the past, the Autobots had gone the length of sending out distress calls to passing aliens. Shockwave suspected that was the case with the fleshing he was holding now. He carelessly dropped the creature. It cried out as it hit the metal deck.

Sintina heard and felt two pops from her ankles as she landed. There was no doubt they were broken. She propped herself up as best she could and gazed

at the giant. The captain was amazed her EVA suit didn't rupture. She fought back the pain and surveyed her environment. The machine had put her in the corner. It was a cavernous room with a large pillar in the center. There appeared to be few monitors and control panels in various places, but all were far beyond her reach.

She then noticed a few small, spider-like machines converging on the giant. He was oblivious to them. They crawled in and around Shockwave, presumably conducting repairs to the larger robot's systems.

Shockwave's single 'eye' focused on the intruder. "What arrangement do your people have with the Autobots?"

The captain was still unsure what her best response should be. Would feigning knowledge of the other faction buy her time? If she told it the truth, would the robot kill her now? She had to say something. In the end, she couldn't think of a good lie. Her pain, rage, and remorse were indicated in the tone of her reply, "I don't know anything about the Autobots! We were just exploring, like I said!" Aurelia dared, "Return me to my ship or my vessel will level this whole damn place!" She hoped bin Nadal could still hear her over the comline and act. Unfortunately, the heavily shielded fort prevented transmission.

The purple robot tilted its head, "You are a very foolhardy creature, aren't you?" He knelt down. His head was as tall as her whole body. The Decepticon declared, "You have sealed your fate, insect. If you are cooperating with the insurgents, I will destroy you and your vessel. If you are not; you have trespassed, attacked me, and threatened to annihilate our capitol. ...So...I will destroy you and your vessel."

"We were defending ourselves!" she spat.

The metal floor under Sintina shook as the machine shifted his weight and stood. "So are we."

Another slightly smaller, but still huge, humanoid machine entered. Unlike, Shockwave, it had a recognizable 'face.' Its glowing, red eyes glanced at Sintina with what looked like disdain.

Shockwave regarded the newcomer, "Cyclonus, report. ...No respond in their language. I want it to hear about your attack."

Cyclonus' wings folded neatly against his back. He reluctantly proceeded. "The attack was ineffective."

"What?"

The fighter commander continued, "They have a defensive electro-static barrier surrounding their ship. It is quite powerful. Scourge, Blitzwing, and Dreadwing were all destroyed."

A defiant smile emerged on Aurelia lips. Since she would surely die anyway, she saw no reason to not pour salt in the wound. "Bit off a bit more than you could chew, huh? That's a shame."

Shockwave's head jerked toward her. He slammed his foot down centimeters away from the seated Sintina. The reverberations were deafening. The Guardian looked back at Cyclonus. <Proceed with your report.>

<If we could find away around the energy shield, it would greatly increase our odds at defeating them,> Cyclonus determined.

The former tank ignored the obvious statement, <Dirge meant with failure as well. He lost contact with Sideswipe went the rebel went underground.>

The Seeker leader added, <I was able to scan the interior of the vessel. They utilize a matter/anti-matter power source.>

Shockwave stepped closer to him, <That could reactivate Vector Sigma! How much anti-matter do they have?>

<One point five-seven cubic cenivuns.>

<With that amount, we could revitalize the entire planet.>

Cyclonus crossed his arms, <The problem remains...how can we circumvent the barrier?>

The red beacon on the Decepticon's face turned to Captain Aurelia. <Sometimes insects do have their purposes.>

## CHAPTER 9

### **Supplemental USS Independence, EVA Locker Room In Orbit of Cybertron**

Karim had only worn the TEVA, sometimes called a 'hardened' EVA suit, twice; once for mandatory training in the academy, the other for a mission during the war. He loved the suits. The helmet utilized a Heads Up Display that could show any number of things. It reacted to verbal command or eye movements. The suit itself hid bio-signs and, while it didn't have a cloak, it did use stealth technology. Several 'grab-points' held tools and weapons. It also had nearly half a centimeter of ferrofibrous armor. Each suit was custom replicated for the wearer. So, despite the armor, the precise joints actually allowed for greater articulation and mobility than the standard EVA.

Chief Hatora walked up, fully dawned in his own TEVA. His helmet attached to his chest. He reported the status of one of the three Type-10 shuttles the *Indy* held, "The *Frazi* is ready to launch, sir."

The first officer sealed his left boot and stood, "And the *Cullen*?" referring to the landing craft, a Type-8.

The Illyrian nodded, "Ensign Lemipil is doing her final checks."

"Lemipil," bin Nadal repeated. "She's the senior officer in the security division now, isn't she?"

Hatora confirmed.

The executive officer thought absently, "It'll be awhile until we can get a replacement for Virak." He lingered for a moment...and began to mourn for the Vulcan.

The Chief of the Boat volunteered, "If she gets over her head, I'll help out, sir."

"I know," Karim responded. He took a breath, understanding there wasn't time to grieve...not yet. He regained his command mentality, "Have you ever seen anything like those...things before?"

"Not exactly," the Illyrian rejoined, "I've seen war walkers on Kentares IV, but they didn't change form...and they were manned."



Bin Nadal began to move to the adjacent shuttle bay, Hatora in tow. The cavernous bay was three decks high. The lower level stored the remaining small craft. The main area was the launch deck and the upper level, shuttle control. They entered the launch deck. The exterior door was open. The *Cullen* and *Frazi* were abreast of each other in departure position. To the XO's surprise, Lieutenant Commander Windslow waited near the aft hatch of one of the shuttles.

The chief engineer offered, "Commander bin Nadal, I had a flash of inspiration. I've loaded the *Frazi* with four Mark 22 torpedoes."

Karim searched his mind and had to admit ignorance. "Mark 22?"

"The Border Service uses them more often than the main fleet," explained Ethan, "but we had a few in inventory." He stepped forward, excitement on his face, "You see the problem with using photons, even at low yield, is the possible proximity to the crew."

Bin Nadal was pleased to see Windslow excited...about anything, but still broke in, "And the 22's help us, how?"

The disgraced captain said, "The 22's don't use a matter/anti-matter charge. Instead, they produce an electro-magnetic pulse. The Border Dogs use them to disable small, poorly shielded craft."

Hatora interrupted, "Sounds just like it'll work just fine on our robot friends."

Windslow continued, "It'll disable the TEVA and shuttle's systems as well, but the suits will work fine without the onboard computer."

Lieutenant Commander bin Nadal dared to place a hand on Windslow's shoulder and smiled, "Good thinking."

Ethan glanced at the hand, but allowed the gesture and curtsied.

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The hovercars neared a standing figure in a clearing of the chrome landscape.

Tang found himself staring at the automaton as they approached. Kup appeared to be about 5 meters tall. He was mostly turquoise and gray in color. The machine had obvious battle scars on his frame.

Sideswipe and Wheeljack came to a stop.

The sports model's doors lifted open. After the two Starfleet officers hesitated, Sideswipe offered, "Trust me, you don't wanna be inside when I transform."

Various parts on the white vehicle began to move, slowly at first, then faster, until the shifting gears and pieces became a blur. Ultimately, all the parts reformed Wheeljack in humanoid form. The entire process didn't take more than two seconds. The Autobot commented after the ballad of moving metal was over, "Besides, it would take forever to clean the stain you would leave."

D'nas and Tang shared a concerned look for only a moment before vacating the hovercar. Soon after, Sideswipe assumed a bi-pedal shape, as well.

Upon shaking off his astonishment, Zian thought of a question, "Are you machines really sentient or just a collection of programmed responses like a hologram?"

The nearly two story tall cell leader knelt down and seemed to examine the officers. Tang examined back. Its blue, glowing eyes were so intricate. The same glyphs he noticed on the building were etched on his 'helmet.' This robot seemed to have more superficial damage than the other two.

Kup rejoined in an elder voice, "Prove to us that you're sentient, lad."

"What?"

The Autobot prodded, "Prove to us that you're not just a collection of responses that you've learned from your own culture."

The Tamarian jumped in, "A valid point."

The science officer stumbled, "Uh...I guess I've never thought about it like that."

Kup stood back up, "Maybe you should." He shook his head, "You couldn't have landed on a worse part of the planet."

“Yeah,” said Sideswipe, “you landed right next to the Decepticon stronghold.” He added with a large, raised thumb, “Good going.”

The senior officer attempted to defend himself with, “There was a concentration of power signatures nearby.”

“Of course,” confirmed Kup, “it’s where the ‘cons horde their supply of energy.”

D’nas noticed a pattern. All three of the machines had some type of emblem displayed, “What do those red...faces on you mean?”

Wheeljack answered, “It’s the icon of the commercial brand. The Decepticons have a purple one.”

“Are your systems positronic?...isolinear?” blurted Tang, still soaking in as much information as he could.

The question seemed to confuse the towering figures. Finally, Wheeljack, the engineer, responded, “We don’t know.”

The seemingly elder robot spoke, “We do know that our sparks are what give us consciousness.”

“Spark?” repeated D’nas.

“Technology the Quintessons acquired and incorporated into us,” said Wheeljack. “They called it a lasercore.”

‘Swipe added, “Only Vector Sigma, a super-computer, can produce them and it’s been powered down for eons.”

The consequence of the Autobot’s statement was not lost on Zian, “So you...your species... can’t reproduce.”

“That’s right,” Kup acknowledged.

The science officer followed up with, “So how many Cybertronians are there?”

The Autobot engineer informed them, "There are 64 Decepticons and ...with Trailbreaker gone...11 Autobots on the planet. Several others, of both factions, are scattered about the galaxy."

"You're outnumbered six to one," observed the exchange officer.

The red 'bot said, "Now you see why we hide."

## CHAPTER 10

### **Supplemental Shuttlecraft Cullen Moments until Planetside Rendezvous**

Ensign Lemipil yawed the shuttle slightly above the landing site. Allowing Lieutenant Commander bin Nadal to get a good look and run security scans.

He reported, "It looks like each robot has plasma weapons and chemical explosive rockets as armaments."

"With respect sir," began the Zakdorn pilot, "If these three creatures are hostile, why did they rescue our people and allow them to communicate with us?"

"In my experience, Ensign," he retorted, "rarely does anyone do something for nothing."

The young officer quipped, "Even Starfleet?"

The remark caused a humorless grin to form on the first officer's face, "Even Starfleet." His scans returned more information, "They sure are built to last. The robots have an exoskeleton armor made of a matrix consisting of duranium, magnesite, carbon nanotubes, titanium boride, and silicon carbide."

Lemipil commented, "That sounds stronger than our shuttlecraft hull."

"It is," confirmed the Persian. He opened a channel to their support shuttle, "Chief, I'm going to take us down. Maintain a holding pattern to watch our backs."

*"Acknowledged."*

\*\*\*\*\*

Science officer Tang sighed with relief when he saw one of the shuttles begin a descent maneuver. The craft eased onto the metal deck with a soft hum. The three, 5 meter tall beings stood casually waiting for the encounter. D'nas smiled through his cracked visor. The shuttle faced them. Unbeknownst to

the group, the vessel's two phasers were locked onto Kup and Sideswipe. A second small craft flew overhead.

The aft hatch opened. Four security personnel in TEVA's formed a defensive perimeter around the boat. Ensign Lemipil could be seen through the shuttle's forward window. She made to attempt to leave the pilot's seat. Another figure, in a dark gray colored battle suit, walked with a slight bounce toward the looming automatons.

D'ns looked up at the Autobots. They seemed rather unimpressed with Commander bin Nadal's show of force; Sideswipe, particularly, showed body signs of annoyance.

Zian's EVA com chirped on, "Lieutenant Tang, are you alright?" He recognized the voice of this first officer. He assumed he was the figure walking toward them, though, he couldn't see his superior's face through the tinted visor.

The science officer gladly responded, "We're fine, Commander. We haven't been mistreated at all by this faction."

An unenthusiastic, "Great," came from the suited figure, "Will they be able to understand me if I activate my external speaker?"

"Yes sir."

Karim, wielding a phaser rifle, calmly neared the large robots. "Thank you for getting my people out of there."

"It's about time someone said, 'thank you,'" griped the red machine.

The older 'bot snapped, "Shut up, 'Swipe." Kup took a large step toward the new encased biologic. "You're welcome. Are you their leader?"

"At the moment, yes," replied bin Nadal. He added, "There is another one of us. A purple tank...creature took her into a structure..."

"Shockwave," volunteered Wheeljack, "He took her into Kolkular, our enemy's compound."

"Do you know how we could get her back?" Karim prodded.

The machines shared glances with each other. Finally, the cell leader said, "If you're asking for our help..."

"More help," Sideswipe bitterly inserted.

Kup continued after a brief shake of his head, "We can't get you into Kolkular." He meekly added, "We'd like to help, but the rest of the Autobots are on the other side of the planet, in Iacon."

Bin Nadal huffed inside his suit. Immediately the air system evaporated the spot on his visor left by his breath. "I understand," he conceded. "D'nas, Tang, get into the shuttle."

Neither really wanted to leave. Their curiosity about this new species had engrossed both of them. Despite that, however, they made their way to the awaiting craft.

"Hold on," stepped up Sideswipe, "That's it? A thank you!"

As the other shoe dropped, Commander bin Nadal gestured for Tang and D'nas to continue. He addressed the towering robot, "What more do you want?" Hoping the dialog would at least buy enough time for his people to board.

The Autobot went down to his hands and knees, bringing his face close to the suited human.

Karim fought his urge to raise his weapon.

"Listen," continued the former racer, "we lost one of our own saving your people from their own stupidity."

"Swipe..." began the elder 'bot.

"No!" blasted the red machine as he regarded Kup, "The least these things can do is reciprocate somehow!"

"What did you have in mind?" tactfully questioned the first officer. On his HUD, he saw both Tang and D'nas were in the shuttle. The fact bolstered his position, slightly.

The massive, complex face turned back, "Some power generators. It doesn't matter how the energy is produced, we can covert it into usable energon." There was an obvious desperation about his tone.

Karim considered the request. It wasn't an unreasonable appeal. The Prime Directive didn't seem to apply. These beings seemed to have the know-how, but not the means. Starfleet regularly provided various races and colonies with microfusion generators. He looked at the three Autobots. All of them were, in turn, looking at him in anticipation of his answer. A doubt...a worry entered his mind. If he did this, would he be prolonging a war? If he refused them, could he and his team all make it back alive? He cautiously chose a third option. He clasped his rifle to his thigh and took out a tricorder, "Can you download information off this device?"

The white machine offered, "If we're within a few meters of it, sure."

Bin Nadal tapped on it and said, "We don't have any power generators with us now. But don't worry; we'll be in orbit until we get our last crew member out of here. Are you capable of simple radio communication?"

"Of course," impatiently replied Sideswipe.

The first officer responded, "I'm sending you a frequency that our ship will be able to pick up. So we can communicate at anytime."

Kup moved closer, "So you *are* going to come back with some power sources?"

Karim hadn't decided if this was a lie or not,..."Yes." His first priority, however, was to get Tang and D'nas back to the ship safe and find Sintina.

With that, the former racing machine stood back up, "Well, alright then. When can we expect you again?"

The first officer wanted to delay as much as possible without upsetting the large robots, "About two hours."

Kup approximated a grin, "We'll see you then."

Bin Nadal made his way back to the craft as calmly and quickly as he could. The security team retreated as well.



Once the Starfleet shuttle ascended, Wheeljack questioned, <Do you really think they'll come back?>

The older robot rejoined, <If I were them, I'd get as far from this planet as possible.>

Sideswipe resentfully suggested, <We should have forced them to help us.>

Kup looked over, <That's not how Prime would want us to operate, lad.>

The red racer gazed at the departing craft, now just a glimmer in the dark sky, "Don't disappoint us."

## CHAPTER 11

### **Supplemental USS Independence, Main Bridge In Orbit of Cybertron**

The turbolift door parted for Commander bin Nadal, still in his TEVA, minus helmet and gloves. He moved with purpose, "I came as soon as I could. You've reacquired the captain's signal?"

Windslow confirmed, "Yes sir." He vacated the center seat.

The first officer waved him back down.

The former captain continued, "She's exited the compound with the same robot that took her."

"Shockwave," bin Nadal informed.

Kimula, the Andorian com. officer, announced, "Sintina's talking to us."

"On speaker," ordered the armored commander.

*"...pendence come in."*

"Yes Captain, we're reading."

*"My captor has agreed to release me if we agree to place a warning buoy in orbit to prevent further 'flesh creatures' from coming near the planet."*

Pouncing at the chance to get Sintina back, despite any possible treachery, Karim said, "Understood, we'll send a shuttle to..."

*"No. That's not part of the deal,"* came from the captain.

He and Ethan shared a worried glance.

Aurelia went on, *"I'll be sent to the Independence via one of their fightercraft robots."*

Again, the chief engineer and first officer exchanged a silent concern. Bin Nadal said, "Understood, Captain." He added, "We'll be waiting."

*"See you soon."*

Karim gestured for Kimula to mute the transmission.

Commander Windslow immediately suggested, "Maybe we could beam her out before it gets too close."

The Persian shook his head, "They have magnesite in their armor. Transporters won't work if she's near it."

Bin Nadal activated the com. on his suit's forearm, "Chief Hatora."

*"Yes sir."*

"Are you still in the shuttle bay?"

*"Yes sir."*

"Good."

\*\*\*\*\*

Despite herself, Captain Aurelia was somewhat awestruck as the 10 meter tall Thundercracker shape-shifted into what looked like a typical space fighter. Ironically, she was grudgingly thankful that Shockwave placed her inside the cockpit. Her ankles could no longer support her weight. Now, she and Thundercracker neared the *Independence*.

She knew something was up, but wasn't sure what. Shockwave tried to make a show of a light interrogation, but the huge machine could have done a lot more than just intimidate her. *'Maybe that thing had some common sense and figured he'd better give me back and be done with us?'* He seemed genuinely eager to have a warning buoy in orbit, once she suggested it.

None the less, she knew her first officer. Karim would take precautions.

A part of her felt...violated...exposed...weak. She didn't like how totally defenseless she was against these machines. She was at their complete mercy the whole time. Nothing she did mattered. She couldn't fight back...she couldn't even run away.

The dark blue fighter passed along the dorsal side of the *Steamrunner* class ship. She half expected the Decepticon to eject her, transform, and begin tearing into the *Indy*...it didn't.

Thundercracker made a slow, smooth turn for his approach to the main shuttle bay. The large bay door was already opened; a soft blue light glowed around its perimeter. Due to the lack of atmosphere in the cockpit, Sintina still had her full EVA suit on. Besides that, she realized, it might be wise to leave it on. Her instinct was confirmed when she saw a single figure, probably Karim...the face was hidden by the darkened visor, in a TEVA suit standing in the bay.

She ventured as they neared, "Commander bin Nadal, how are we doing?"

A familiar voice responded, "Oh you know me, Captain...just going with the flow."

"I see," she acknowledged.

\*\*\*\*\*

The fighter slowly penetrated the barrier separating space from air and landed. The cockpit hatch began to open. Once it did, many things happened nearly instantly: Aurelia violently pushed herself out of the cockpit, the fighter began to transform, Karim pointed to the shuttle bay director, Ensign Wilson, in the sealed control room, and a small pod was flung out of the still transitioning Thundercracker.

The pod never landed. Instead it formed a hawk-like machine. It made a beeline for the control center.

The exterior forcefield dropped. Atmosphere rushed out into the void. Karim and Sintina welcomed the maelstrom and allowed themselves to be blown out.

The large Decepticon's mass was too much for the vacating air to have an effect on. He fully transformed and had to hunch slightly in the bay.

The smaller robot successfully shot through the transparent aluminum window of the control office and entered. As it did, the Decepticon rammed its 'beak' right into the face of the young ensign. It withdrew its bloody, metal head and latched itself onto the panel.

\*\*\*\*\*

Karim looked back as he sped away from the bay. The robot turned at looked back at him, in what seemed like, bewilderment. The first officer said, "Chief, go."

The shuttlecraft *Frazi* came up from underneath the uniquely placed aft deflector dish pod and trained its phaser on the Decepticon still in the shuttle bay.

She couldn't be sure, but Sintina thought she saw Thundercracker's jaw drop.

The *Frazi* let loose a few blasts that caused the Cybertronian to explode into several gnarled chunks of metal.

The captain looked over at bin Nadal, who floated along with her, several meters away. The tell-tale signs of a transporter formed around him. She felt the tug of a containment beam as well.

\*\*\*\*\*

Captain Aurelia materialized, next to Karim, on the sick-bay floor. Doctor Zo'Kama was instantly at her side and began scanning.

Bin Nadal removed his helmet, "How is she?"

"Pissed that we went down there in the first place!" answered Sintina. She removed her head covering as well, "That's how I feel."

The reptilian responded with only a slight hint of satire, "She'll be fine."

The captain ignored the banter, "Aurelia to bridge, report!"

Before the response could come, a klaxon sounded; followed the automated announcement, "Intruder alert. Intruder alert. All personnel initiate lock-down procedures."

The Arkonian doctor cocked her head, "Answers that question, huh?"

Both Commander bin Nadal and the captain gave her a disparaging expression.

Zo’Kama was too busy to notice, “You have several torn ligaments, both your tali are cracked, and you have a broken fibula.” Without further comment, she moved away to get tools.

*“Bridge to Captain Aurelia. Good to know you’re safe, ma’am,”* said Windslow’s voice.

Sintina pressed, “Status.”

*“There’s a second robot in shuttle control. It’s uploading some type of virus into our computer. I’m repressurizing the bay and sending in security.”*

Karim made for the exit, “I’m going down there to help them.”

Again finding herself only moderately helpful, Aurelia asked, “What’s the virus doing?”

*“We don’t know yet, Captain.”*

Only then did the mocha-skinned captain look around sick-bay. D’nas and Tang were in their EVA under suits still. The science officer’s eyes seemed to make a request of her. She told him, “Get up there and help them.”

The Asian nearly jumped off the biobed and strode to the door, “Yes, ma’am.”

The tan-scaled Arkonian returned with a device in her hands and began treatment. She overheard the conversation. She was tempted to scold her captain for releasing one of her patients without her permission, but wisely let it slide.

Anxious to regain control of her ship, Aurelia pestered, “How long is this going to take?”

Even though, she had been in the fleet for fourteen years, Zo’Kama earned her degree via civilian education. She always considered herself a doctor who happened to be a Starfleet officer; not the other way around. She didn’t look up from her work, “Longer, if you distract me.”

Seeing no other choice, Sintina accepted her continued impotence.

## CHAPTER 12

### **Supplemental USS Independence, Shuttle Bay Control In Orbit of Cybertron**

Despite the machine's hawk-like structure, it was very intelligent. Laserbeak had played the role of spy for millions of years. The destruction of his current host was an unfortunate turn of events.

The virus, however, was loaded and would soon go to work. The question became: what now? He lacked the fuel to make it back to Cybertron and the biocreatures would descend upon him soon. Perhaps he could assist in the coming attack.

The infiltrator noticed the fleshlings' craft still sat on the deck below.

\*\*\*\*\*

Lieutenant Tang assumed his station on the bridge. No one seemed to care about his under suit attire.

Ethan Windslow stood over his shoulder, "I've already tried to isolate the virus. Maybe you'll have more luck."

Zian started his attempt at the console. "I've never seen an intrusive program like this," observed the science officer. "It's hacking our security firewalls almost like they're not there."

"What's it trying to do?" the second officer asked.

The answer came for Ensign Lemipil, standing at the tactical station, "Sir, I've just shields...now weapons."

Commander Windslow stood straight. An impending feeling of doom took him, "Oh, no."

The Zakdorn security officer's next report was what the chief engineer expected. "Sir, I'm reading 18 fighter craft leaving the surface. They're heading this way."

Windslow addressed the operations officer, PO Dorian, "We have six armed shuttles left. Scramble them all."

"Aye sir."

\*\*\*\*\*

The Karim, still in the tactical suit, swept the control booth with his phaser rifle as soon as the door parted. A quick visual scan revealed no robot. There was no need to aid Ensign Wilson...the blood and other matter oozing from where his face used to be made the deck slick.

It wasn't here. He gestured to the other security officers with him to proceed to the launch deck. He looked out the shattered window. That creature had to be somewhere in the cavernous bay...but where?

As the security team climbed down the nearby ladder and spread out across the bay, the heavy interior door hummed open and several people rushed in.

"Close that door!" Karim yelled down. He followed up with, "What are you doing here? This is a secure location at the moment."

One of the pilot's, a Tellarite female, looked up, "Commander Windslow ordered us to launch the remaining shuttles, sir."

"Why?"

The young officer, Karim now recognized her as Ensign Gelm, answered promptly and with a hint of irascibility, "Incoming fighters."

The first officer held up a hand to the group of pilots and said, "Bin Nadal to Bridge."

*"Bridge here."*

"Windslow, we still haven't secured the shuttle bay. I don't feel comfortable launching shuttles right now," respectfully explained Karim.

*"That virus disabled our shields and weapons, and we have a squadron of fighters incoming."*



The Persian's ego was small enough to overlook the slight breach of the chain of command. Besides, Windslow was the one on the bridge. When you're in the center seat, you make the call. He wouldn't chide the man for doing his job. The first officer was more concerned about the intruder. He came up with a time appropriate compromise. He ordered down to the security team, "Search the shuttles before they launch."

A series of vocal confirmations followed. He didn't like the solution, but considering the situation, it's the best he could do. He transmitted to the bridge, "Understood, the shuttles will be launching shortly."

\*\*\*\*\*

Chief of the Boat Hatora, already in the *Frazi*, took up a position between the fighters and the *Steamrunner* starship. The Illyrian examined his tactical display. They'd be in firing range in just over a minute. He opened a channel, "I'm feeling rather lonely out here, sir. What's the status of those shuttles?"

"On the way, Chief."

\*\*\*\*\*

Ensign Gelm ran her last essential check. She yelled out the open hatch, "Come on you glorified bar bouncer, get in here and take a look! I'm ready to go!"

Petty Officer Runningfox, a human male wearing gold peaked in, "Anything out of the normal in here?"

"Yes, a shape-shifting tribble'bot just humped my leg. I had to fake it so it'd leave...can I go now?" rejoined the pilot.

The security officer rolled his eyes, "By all means."

\*\*\*\*\*

"If you insist on walking right away," began Commander Zo'Kama, "then I'm going to have you wear external braces around your ankles."

Aurelia sat on the edge of a biobed. She impatiently nodded, "Fine, just do it."

\*\*\*\*\*

In main engineering, they did their best without their department head. The engineering section was always the most dangerous place to be in a starship. But none of the golden-clad Starfleet officers expected what came next.

There wasn't even a warning klaxon. Violently and instantly, the vertically aligned warp core was sucked downward. The rush of air pulled a few crew members, who were unfortunate enough to be too close, went with it.

\*\*\*\*\*

One of the *Indy's* shuttles nearly ran into the ejecting warp core on the ventral side of the ship. It wasn't the only thing escaping from the *Steamrunner*-class vessel. Several anti-matter storage pods were jettisoned into space as well.

\*\*\*\*\*

Sintina was rocked in the turbolift as the emergency stop engaged. The sudden jolt caused her still tender ankles to burn with pain. The lights failed. She had enough time to think, *'What now?'* before the reserve power came on and the lift continued to deck one.

\*\*\*\*\*

Captain Aurelia strode onto the bridge; the discomfort from her feet only adding to her resolve. "What just happened?"

Windslow rose from the center seat, "That damn virus. It ejected the core. It took three engineers with it before the emergency bulkhead engaged. Our containment pods ejected as well."

*'That's why it was so easy. I was played!'* Sintina realized. Disappointed in herself, she took it out on the science officer. Her voice had a hard bite to it, "What else is that freaking thing going to do to us?"

The science officer shook his head, "I'm not sure, ma'am. It's the most adaptive virus I've ever come across. It's like it's alive, Captain."

"Don't blame him, Captain," Windslow said in a hushed tone, "He's been doing the best he can."

Aurelia knew it was true, but it didn't stop her frustration. She regarded the main viewer, which showed the tactical situation. The impending attack

refocused her mind. “Six shuttles against eighteen fighters. Even with shields, they’ll be overwhelmed.”

The former captain grimly assessed, “They’re the only defense we have left.”

## CHAPTER 13

### **Supplemental Type-10 Shuttlecraft Frazi In Orbit of Cybertron**

The hostile vessels were in optimal range. The Illyrian Chief of the Boat tapped the launch initiator. It was time for the 'rat traps.'

\*\*\*\*\*

Two bright yellow projectiles flew from the *Frazi*. The fighters began to scatter as the Mark 22 torpedoes neared. Nearly instantaneously, the two EMP devices exploded and created a sphere of disruptive energy. Unfortunately, only four Seekers were caught in the blast and began to drift. At least, they *did* lose power.

\*\*\*\*\*

The non-com was rattled as the first plasma discharges impacted his shields. He glanced down. His protective barrier was holding at 97 percent, but that comfortable margin wouldn't last.

Hatora accelerated to full impulse. He knew the other shuttles were still forming up behind him, but the combat couldn't be stalled now.

Luckily, most of the Decepticons passed him by. Only two directly engaged him. He wanted to feel relieved...but knew better. That only meant they weren't after him.

\*\*\*\*\*

A steady stream of plasma energy bombarded the *Frazi's* shields. The shuttle answered with a phaser beam. It made a glancing blow on one of the agile fighters, causing it to tumble erratically.

The two forces engaged each other ferociously. Bursts and beams of energy crisscrossed space.

Two Cybertronian seekers, Cyclonus and Skywarp, made their way through the fray.

\*\*\*\*\*

One of the footlockers/benches in the aft section of the shuttlecraft *Zammis* opened slightly. A pair of glowing, red eyes peaked out. There was only one flesh creature in the vessel. He could easily overpower it.

\*\*\*\*\*

<Skywarp, grapple the anti-matter pods. I'll get the reactor,> the fighter leader transmitted. <The rest of you, distract the small craft.>

\*\*\*\*\*

Captain Aurelia observed the conflict from the bridge. "Chief Hatora, they're going after the warp core. Intercept them."

*"I wish I could, ma'am. My targeting sensors have been damaged. I'm having trouble hitting anything."*

In frustration, Sintina let out a huff. "*Indy* to any shuttle pilot. Target the fighter towing the core!"

*"This is Ensign Gelm in the Zammis. I'm on it, Captain."*

"Good luck, Ensign," said Aurelia.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Tellarite pilot closed the channel. "Luck...hupf. I only wish that thing had testicles...so I could rip 'em off."

Gelm adjusted course, making a pot shot at one of the fighters in the process. She saw the warp core and the purple jet near it. She'd have to be very careful with her fire. Should the core be hit accidentally, it would take most of them, and the ship, with it.

The targeting computer locked on. Her hand moved to the fire button.

A high pitched noise...like a screech...came from behind her. She swung around to see a meter tall, artificial, bird of prey. Its red eyes were cold, but intelligent. Gelm began to realize the totality of her error. There was no time to curse before a bright light took her.

\*\*\*\*\*

The forward window of the *Zammis* exploded out from the inside. Chunks of flesh, atmosphere, and Laserbeak flew out of the breach.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ramjet, the red and white fighter, dove down on the *Frazi*. The Decepticon seemed to be on a collision course. At the last moment, the Cybertronian transformed and grabbed on to the dorsal side of the shuttle.

\*\*\*\*\*

Chief Hatora heard something large hit the overhead. It was on the outside. Pounding...scrapping began. The hull began to creak. Alarms went off as the computer detected micro-fractures forming. The sound of gases escaping into space filled the cabin. Quickly, he activated the emergency beam out.

The computer responded, "Unable to comply. A nearby source of magnesite is disrupting transporter function."

"Damn," cursed the Illyrain as he opened the deck panel to the escape pod.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ramjet was nearly pushed off the craft by the gases from the small hull breach he had created. He continued to hit and claw the shuttle. Finally, a large enough rupture was formed to cause the Starfleet craft to violently decompress.

The robotic creature was blown several meters away but maneuvered back to examine the inside of the compromised shuttle. He saw no biologics. Satisfied, Ramjet reverted to fighter form and searched for another target.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ensign Lemipil reported from tactical, "Another shuttle, the *Frazi*, is out of the fight."

"How many attackers are left?" questioned Windslow.

The young Zakdorn responded, "Nine, sir. Ten, if you count the smaller one that attached itself to one of the fighters."

"And four shuttles," finished the captain.

As if a switch had been pulled, all the monitors and lights blinked off on the bridge.

"Report!" demanded Aurelia.

Tang spoke up, "It must be the virus. We've lost sensors, backup generators, life support...everything."

The captain tapped her compin, "Aurelia to any shuttlecraft."

"Sharlin *here, ma'am.*"

She explained, "We're blind and dead in the water. What's the status out there?"

*"Our shields are all below 30 percent. The hostiles with the core and pods are moving off. I'm sorry ma'am, they're covering us too well to get to it."*

Commander Windslow fumbled in the dark, but managed to get close to Aurelia. He said in a hushed voice, "Captain, this isn't going well. We'll need those shuttles. If all they want at the moment is the core; let them have it. We need to regroup."

"We need to get that goddamn virus out of my computer!" she snapped.

The science officer chimed in, "I don't know how to isolate it, Captain. But I bet I know someone who does."

Sintina desperately wanted to hit or kick something. After she forced her rational mind to the surface, she ordered, "Aurelia to remaining shuttlecraft..." She reluctantly continued, "Withdraw from the enemy forces. Use the *Independence* as cover if you have to."

A quartet of "Aye ma'am's," followed. A pilot reported, "Ma'am, I'm reading a life sign in what's left of the Frazi. ...It's the escape pod but it hasn't been launched."

"Use your shuttle's transporter to beam Chief Hatora to sick bay," responded Sintina.

*"Yes, ma'am."*

A moment later, Windslow prompted, "Are they following you?"

*"Negative sir, the fighters are returning to the surface."*

Aurelia said, "I want those four shuttles on constant patrol around us. Repair them in flight. And I want a senior officer conference in five minutes." She looked around. The lack of light didn't reveal much. "And get some goddamn beacons in here."



## CHAPTER 14

### **Supplemental USS Independence, Conference Lounge In Orbit of Cybertron**

The room was lit only with lanterns and star light. The crew appeared particularly motley at this meeting. Captain Aurelia, Tang, and D'nas were still in their white EVA under suits. First Officer bin Nadal was armor-clad. The rest of the senior officers, Windslow, Kimula, Zo'Kama, Hatora, Operations Manager Dorian, and the temporary tactical chief, Ensign Lemipil wore the standard duty uniform.

Aurelia didn't sit. She immediately blurted as the last of the crew assembled, "Report."

Normally, bin Nadal would begin, but he gestured to Windslow as he had been the de facto CO during most of the action.

The chief engineer interlaced his fingers and rested them on the table, "Including Virak, five are KIA."

"Another three are being treated for exposure," inserted Zo'Kama.

Dorian reported, "So far, three of seven armed shuttles have been destroyed."

"How many unarmed do we have?" questioned the captain.

"Three Type-15 shuttlepods."

"Arm them," coldly ordered Sintina.

The ops manager responded, "It'll take an hour or two, ma'am," as he made a note on a padd.

"Fine," she turned to Tang, "What about that damned virus?"

"As I said, ma'am," he apologetically began, "I've tried every counter measure and isolation algorithm I can think of. ...I can't stop it."

Picking up on his previous statement, Aurelia assumed, "But you think that other faction on the planet can?"

“Yes, ma’am. I’d have to think the Autobots have dealt with this type of attack before,” the science officer concluded.

The captain crossed her arms and sighed deeply. “...Alright, we don’t have much of a choice anyway. At this point, we’ll either die from lack of oxygen or freeze to death...”

The Arkonian doctor leaned in, “Oh, we’d die of asphyxiation first...in about two days... Captain.”

All eyes in the room momentarily found Zo’Kama. After an interesting pause, Sintina continued, “Right. ...So we contact the Autobots and get rid of this virus first. Then we get our core back.”

“Captain,” started Windslow, “We’re about twenty light years away from Tamarian space. We should have one of the shuttles send a distress call. They might have a ship in range.”

Aurelia realized that would be one of the first things most Starfleet captains would do. One of her major failings was her unwillingness to ask for help. *She* could solve this problem. Her crew looked at her expectantly. They all knew it was the right course of action. She knew it too...but not yet. She said, “If our first attempt at recovering the core fails, then we’ll send out a general distress call. Not before.”

There were subtle reactions in the group, but no one pressed the issue.

The officer in grey armor raised another point, “There’s something you should know, Captain.” He uncomfortably informed her, “The Autobots are expecting us to provide them with power generators for saving Tang and D’nas.”

Sintina deliberately placed her hands on the marble table and looked into her first officer’s eyes. “I’d be willing to give them a lot more than that if they help us.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Karim approached the Honduran captain as she made final adjustments to her TEVA in the darkened locker room. He made sure no one was in ear shot. “Sintina,” he began.

She knew exactly what he was going to say and she was in no mood to beat around the bush. She didn't look up, "I watched Virak explode, Karim. One of these...Autobots was shot at point black range as he reached to save me." Aurelia ran a check of the tricorder interface. "Their actions speak volumes." She listed off, "They defended us against Shockwave, they evacuated two of my officers, and they allowed them to go home."

The Persian observed, "The Decepticons allowed you to go home too."

Sintina gave him an annoyed look, "Do you really think the Autobots are the bad guys?"

"That's too easy," countered Karim, "In real life, there is no such thing as 'good' guys and 'bad' guys."

The captain retrieved a pulse phaser rifle from the arms locker. "Fine...but they haven't tried to kill us."

Bin Nadal paced a bit. "Will you ask them to help us recover the warp core as well?"

"Yes."

"And what if they ask for weapons?" he prodded.

Sintina looked up at him from under her brow. She walked over and grabbed a helmet. Then, she moved to exit to the room. Without looking back, she said, "The ship is yours, Commander."

\*\*\*\*\*

Lieutenant Kimula entered the locker room a minute later. She regarded Karim with a smirk as he began pulling his black duty uniform pants on over his underwear. "You in command of the boat for now?" she asked.

Bin Nadal was only slightly embarrassed as he turned toward her. "Yeah, I guess so. Sintina's shuttle just left."

The Andorian stated, "Since internal comms are out, Windslow wanted me to tell you, the shuttlepods should all be armed with two type-IV phaser arrays

in about an hour.” She gestured to the bulkhead, “But you could probably go next door and figure that out.”

Karim zipped up his red undershirt. “Yeah...oh well.”

Kimula stepped forward. She responded to his inflection, “What do you think she’s going to do?”

He paused as he was slipping on his black and grey jacket. “I think she’s going to start a war.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Captain Aurelia saw three vehicles emerge from their hiding places as the shuttle landed. Before the hatch could open, the trio had amazingly reformed themselves into humanoid robots. The sight was rather spectacular, now that she wasn’t being shot at.

Aurelia, Hatora, Tang, and a couple of security personnel exited the craft. They all wore the more advanced extra-vehicular activity suits. And all were armed.

As they rounded the shuttle, Kup approached them. “You’re back. You’ve managed to surprise and old ‘bot.”

“I’m Captain Sintina Aurelia of the United Federation of Planets. I’m in command of the ship in orbit.”

Sideswipe prompted, “Have you brought the energy?”

She pointed to the security officers. Each went to the shuttle and returned carrying a duffle-sized power generator. “These are microfusion generators. Each will provide about 600 gigawatts of power before the fuel runs out.”

Wheeljack walked up. He got on all fours and scanned the devices. “These generators can power all the Autobots and Iacon for centuries.”

Her heart raced just being in the presence of the colossal beings. Her trepidation...and excitement...was muted, however, by the urgency of their situation. She offered, “There’s more where that came from...if you help us.”

The five meter tall Kup cautiously said, "I told the other one, we can't get you into Kolkular."

"I have two problems," elaborated Sintina. "Your...our enemies have stolen my ship's main reactor, and they uploaded a virus into my ship's computer."

The Autobot engineer volunteered, "I can handle the virus; if you can get me to your ship."

"As for the reactor," said Kup, "there's only one place the 'cons would take it."

"To Vector Sigma," finished Sideswipe. He looked at his comrades, "They're going to start making new Decepticons."

Hatora deduced, "Then our problem is your problem."

Captain Aurelia walked closer to the towering robots. She stated with steely resolve, "If you help us...I promise you...Kolkular will be razed to the ground. What's that worth to you?"

## CHAPTER 15

### **Supplemental USS Independence, Main Shuttle Bay In Orbit of Cybertron**

Shuttlecraft *Sharlin* glided effortlessly into the deserted bay. All activities had to cease, due to the arriving shuttle and the lack of an external force field. In its tractor beam was a white vehicle, Wheeljack. Its cargo was gently placed on the deck moments before the shuttle itself came to rest.

Once the area was repressurized, several crew members delayed returning to their duties as their new passenger altered his form. The shift was so smooth...yet chaotic. The two story tall bay fit the mechanical being rather comfortably. He seemed to be just as interested in the various Federation races as they were of him. It took most people a few seconds to realize they were staring.

A helmetless Aurelia strode out of the shuttle hatch. Emotionless, she looked up at the Autobot. "Can you access our computer now?"

"I've already made the interface," confirmed the robot.

"How long will it take you to eliminate the virus?" the Latin American captain asked impatiently.

The automaton made a shrugging gesture. "I can't say for sure. Definitely less than six hours."

"Six hours?" repeated Aurelia.

"No, I said less than that. Would you rather I lie?" rejoined the Autobot.

The response...not to mention the imposing figure...took her down a notch. "No...no, of course not. I'm sure you'll do your best." She turned to Hatora, who joined her, and said in a murmur, "Watch him."

The peach-skinned Illyrian nodded.

Aurelia then moved with a purpose. She strode passed the engineers finishing the modifications on the shuttlepods and exited through the heavy interior hatch.

\*\*\*\*\*

Captain Aurelia convened yet another conference. This time, she and Tang were the only ones out of their duty uniforms.

"I'm not willing to sit with my thumb up my ass for six hours," Sintina determined.

Commander Windslow leaned in, "What else can we do?"

The captain crossed her arms...as much as her armor would allow. "I'm getting the core back." She slowly made a lap around the table as she elaborated. "The Autobots have agreed to be part of our assault. They're convinced our warp core is near a computer they call Vector Sigma. It's half a kilometer beneath the surface. We've confirmed the intel with our own scans. An m/am reactor's power signature is hard to hide, even with the interference."

"Do the Autobots have a plan of attack?" questioned bin Nadal.

Aurelia continued, "Kup assured me it would be well guarded. So we're going to have to draw the Decepticons out."

"How, ma'am?" queried the Tamarian helm officer.

The captain laid down her bold plan with a tone that left no room for debate. "We're going to launch a full scale assault of Kolkular, the Decepticon stronghold. That will be the distraction. A smaller team will recover the warp core from the underground chamber."

The room became dead silent. Many jaws were slack and eyes were wide.

Sintina took advantage of the hush and began issuing orders. "I want to pack all the shuttles with security personnel and anyone else with combat training. We're going down with a full load out. One shuttle will serve as a rotating transport. The rest will provide supporting fire once they unload.

The *Sharlin* will hold the team that goes after the core." She focused on Windslow, "I'll need our best engineer on that team. So you're going. If anyone gives you crap...well I don't care, just do it."

The disgraced captain acknowledged solemnly.

"Where will the Autobots be during all this?" asked Karim with a hint of cynicism.

The captain replied quickly, "Kup called for assistance, but apparently, the Autobots on planet are restricted to ground travel. So, they may not be there in time. But to answer your question: Kup will meet up with the Vector Sigma team, Sideswipe is part of the Kolkular assault team, and Wheeljack is going to continue to work on the virus up here." She added, "Let's be clear. The Autobots will be able to help, but we are the main fighting force."

Zo'Kama wasn't as intimidated by the bullheaded captain as some of the others. She bluntly pointed out, "Do you realize how bloody this might turn out to be?"

"People die in war, doctor," was the equally frank response. "If you don't think the shuttle is adequate to evacuate the wounded, feel free to set up a pressurized medical shelter on the surface."

After a short, but intense moment, the Arkonian said, "I'll do that, Captain."

"If there's nothing else," concluded Aurelia, "let's make it happen." Without fielding anymore questions, she walked out.

Everyone's gaze found bin Nadal. He stood and said in a practiced command voice, "You heard her. Get moving."

The rest of the officers began to file out of the dark conference lounge. Kimula pleaded to Karim with her eyes. He understood and in a glance agreed with her. Windslow was less subtle.

"Commander, this is going to be messy. There is no reason why we can't delay the attack...at least until the computer and weapons are back up."

Karim nodded, "I know. I'll talk to her."

"I hope you have better luck changing her mind than I did," the chief engineer said as he walked away.



On a purely rational level, bin Nadal knew his promotion to XO would strain his friendship with Sintina. But now, that fact resonated on a much deeper level. He emotionally prepared himself for the confrontation to come.

\*\*\*\*\*

With a soft hiss, the door to Aurelia's ready room slid shut behind Karim. Like the rest of the ship, it was dark.

Sintina leaned over her desk in her TEVA suit. "What is it, Karim?"

He decided to start civil, though he anticipated it wouldn't stay that way. "I recommend you delay the attack until we're back up to one hundred percent, ma'am."

She gave him a frigid look. "One hundred percent?" she repeated. "That's not going to happen, not without a warp core, not without Virak, not without the others dead." She picked up a padd and appeared to be distracted by it. "No, we can't wait."

It was then bin Nadal decided to cross a line he had managed to side step so many times before. There was no way to avoid it this time. He assumed the position of 'at ease' in preparation of what he knew would come next. "With all due respect, ma'am, the course of action you're taking is reckless and ill-conceived. This assault would have a better chance of success if..."

She venomously cut him off, "I don't need this shit! Not from you. Not now!"

"I think you do need it," he said coldly, "it's the role of the first officer to point out alternatives and..."

"...And when to know to shut the hell up!" she spat. "I've made my decision, now get out."

"No."

Aurelia's brows went up. She was nearly in shock. "No?"

"You may have the rest of the crew fooled, Sintina," he started in a surprisingly calm...almost gentle voice, "You go to so much trouble to make yourself look like a cold, tough as nails bitch. But Kimula and I see through

that façade. We've fought with you. We've seen you when your guard was down. We know you're terrified."

"What?" she muttered.

Karim continued as if she hadn't spoken, "Terrified of failure. Terrified of looking weak. Terrified that you really are incompetent."

"Get out!" she roared.

The Persian was unphased. "I can imagine what it must be like for you. Half the senior brass thinks you're a loose cannon. During the war, that trait earned you medals; now, the same people who praised you would rather you not even have a command. That must screw with your confidence."

Sintina wasn't sure to be enraged or not. She stood, confounded.

"It must have been horrible for you, being taken away by that metal monster. It must have been your worst nightmare come to life. For that period of time, you were weak and helpless."

Her jaw began to tremble. She felt water forming around her eyes. Her fists were clinched.

He looked at her intently. "I know all this...and I don't believe you're incompetent. I don't think you're weak. But I do think your ego is very sensitive." He came closer, "No one will think less of you if you change your mind. Caution and re-evaluation is not weakness. And as much as you want to punish the Decepticons for so blatantly showing you your faults, it's not worth going in half-assed and getting slaughtered."

He had said his peace. Without waiting for a reaction, Commander bin Nadal turned and walked out, leaving Sintina to struggle with her own demons.

\*\*\*\*\*

Several long and silent minutes passed on the...for the moment, useless bridge. Officers manned their stations, but there was little to do but stare off into the darkness. Karim had assumed the center seat since leaving the ready room. He sat there, nearly motionless. It was beginning to get rather chilly in the ship.

His compin chirped on, "Captain Aurelia to all department heads. Continue preparation for deployment to the surface. The operation, however, will be postponed until ship's functions are back on-line and our allies on the surface are closer to the target locations. That is all."

The first officer grinned in the dimmed light.

## CHAPTER 16

### **Stardate: 54035.8 (14 January 2377) USS Independence, Armory In Orbit of Cybertron**

Most people had lost track of time. The entire ship was dark and cold. Ensign Lemipil guessed the temperature was about seven degrees. While it was bearable to some, she broke out her field jacket. Petty Officer Runningfox and she were performing above operator maintenance checks on their inventory of Type-3B phasers before they issued them to the assault teams.

The young Pueblo berated himself as he examined a power cell, "I should've told her to shut her damn mouth and step aside while I search her shuttle."

The Zakdorn ensign shrugged. She wasn't used to consoling people. She felt way over her head since she heard of Virak's death. Over the last few hours, events had slowed down slightly. It gave everyone time to breathe...and morn. She absently and unconvincingly responded, "Don't blame yourself."

Cheveyo Runningfox changed the subject to something he knew would incite a response from his superior. "So you're going to be on the Vector Sigma team with Windslow, huh?"

"Pssh, yeah," she huffed. She put a rifle back into the rack and grabbed another. She referred to the chief engineer by a derogatory nickname that was floating around the ship, "Commander Runsfaster better watch his back, because I'm not."

"Oh come on, sir," began the enlisted security specialist, "even if you don't like him..."

"Like or dislike isn't the issue," she interrupted. "He abandoned two dozen of his own crew to get slaughtered by the spoonheads. He's a coward. I don't care if he gets shot, because I know he doesn't care if I get shot. Why should I protect someone like that?" She started to strip the phaser.

Runningfox wasn't too surprised by Lemipil's diatribe. He had heard it before...and not just from her.

She concluded with, "I know for a fact, if something should happen to Windslow down there, there will be several veiled celebrations."

A placating, “yeah,” was Cheveyo’s reply.

\*\*\*\*\*

A male yeoman with a wrist-mounted beacon found Commander bin Nadal in the captain’s chair. “Ensign Lemipil confirmed there are six Mark 22 torpedoes left. That includes two recovered from the *Frazi*.”

“Thank you,” came from the Persian XO. “Now would you check on Wheeljack’s progress with Chief Hatora.”

“Aye,” he said and returned to the Jefferies tube.

PO Dorian was nearly asleep at the ops station. It was probably about zero-two hundred. He, like many others, couldn’t sleep well; so several people simply continued to man their posts. His smooth...and totally black...console suddenly came to life with lights and indicators. He sat up, “Commander, I’ve got internal and external sensors, environmental control, and maneuvering thrusters!”

Karim clasped his hands together. “Great, turn up the heat.”

The Afro-European grinned, “Aye sir!”

\*\*\*\*\*

Sintina stared into her reflection on her computer monitor. She wasn’t sure how much time had passed. She knew now was the time to be proactive and holding her division heads’ feet to the fire. But she was in no mood to deal with people...including herself.

Her mind wandered to her father. He had always pressed her to be the best...the best at everything. Whenever she showed even a slight interest in any sport or hobby, he was over her shoulder urging her to do better. In hindsight, she knew it was his way to encourage her, but his forcefulness only served to suck the enjoyment out of the activity. And when she finally gave up...if only to end the nagging...there was the disappointment in his eyes.

One day, despite her own feelings, she decided not to disappoint him again.

The door enunciator sounded. It took her off guard, since for the last several hours, everyone had to knock. She composed herself a bit before stating, "Come in."

Karim hesitantly entered. He figured enough time had passed for him to speak with her directly. It didn't hurt that he was the bearer of good news. "Ma'am, Wheeljack said he's begun to isolate the virus. Systems are coming online, slowly but surely."

Aurelia, still in the TEVA armor, sat back. "Good."

The executive officer was rather amazed at how...subdued...Sintina was. She didn't appear mad.

"It's a...been a while since someone cut me to the core like that, Karim," she began.

"Captain, I'm..." said the first officer, but she cut him off.

In almost a playful tone she snapped, "Let me finish, damnit. ...If there is one thing I hate, it is to be wrong and to be humbled." She leaned forward, "But it keeps on happening to me."

Karim couldn't resist, "Maybe the universe is trying to tell you something."

She looked up at him in semi-mock annoyance, "Maybe." She nervously rotated in her chair. "So I've been thinking. ...We need a way to get back the core with a minimum of casualties. I don't think my plan is the...safest. Any suggestions?"

A deep feeling of pride swelled up in Karim. This was a huge step for Sintina. He said, "This isn't your burden alone, Sintina. You have a smart crew and powerful allies willing to help. Let's re-evaluate where we stand."

She nodded slightly, "It's a plan."

## CHAPTER 17

### **Stardate: 54039.3 (15 January 2377) USS Independence, Main Bridge In Orbit of Cybertron**

The crew had managed to get a warm night's rest. The time allowed Autobot reinforcements to arrive. Luckily, they were amenable to a change of plans. They did, however, hold Captain Aurelia to her word about Kolkular.

The bridge glowed with a red, flashing light. All the consoles were operational...and it was a comfortable 23 degrees.

Commander bin Nadal stood vigil in the center of the bridge. It was decided, against his objections, that he would remain in charge of the ship during the raid. *"Independence to assault teams: report status."*

Chief Hatora's voice came first. *"Shuttle team is in position. We're ready to begin our attack run."*

*"Ground team in position,"* said Aurelia.

He turned to Dorian, "How do we look?"

The dark-skinned human made one-eye contact, "As bad as we were, sir."

"Excellent," Karim continued, "It looks like we're good to go, Captain."

*"Proceed,"* was the simple, yet powerful reply.

\*\*\*\*\*

A few hours ago, Captain Aurelia, Commander Windslow, Ensign Lemipil, and three other security officers, met up with Kup and the others.

Along with Sideswipe and Wheeljack, three new mechanisms joined their ranks. Sintina didn't bother with too many pleasantries. She knew what might come and didn't want to see these...creatures as anything more than a means to an end. Huffer was just over two meters and, by far, the smallest. He...it was mostly orange and was obviously the cynic of the group. The blue and white robot, Mirage, was able to utilize a type of cloak technology...which he was all too willing to show off. The newcomers were rounded out by the

only Autobot Sintina had seen that came close to the stature of Shockwave. Its alternate form was a vehicle transport. He was called Ultra Magnus.

Despite offers to...ride in the Autobots...Aurelia insisted their Starfleet issue, All-Terrain Vehicles be brought down via shuttle tractor beam. She and Windslow sat in the front of one of them. Lemipil adjusted the buggy's phase cannon to be forward-mounted and manned it behind them. The buggies had open cabins, so all the away team members were outfitted with TEVA's.

They concealed themselves in a dark tunnel. All of their Autobot allies were in their vehicle forms. The six Cybertronians and two Starfleet jeeps were just out of range of the incoming attack.

Speaking over a secure channel, Windslow continued, "I just don't feel right about it, that's all."

"It was Karim's...Commander bin Nadal's idea," she retorted, "and I agree with him. It's a legitimate precaution. Besides, how do you know they're not going to backstab us?"

<Explain to me again, why are we taking the lead on this from aliens?> communicated Huffer. He was a small towing vehicle.

The large transport responded, <It's their technology. They're risking just as much as we are.>

<Hell,> pointed out Sideswipe, <They've already slagged nine 'cons without our help.>

<Yeah, and they could slag us just as easy!> Huffer transmitted.

The old warrior, Kup weighed in, <They won't do that. That Aurelia person came through with the power generators, didn't she?>

<I still think Wheeljack should've planted a virus of his own, just in case.> said the smaller machine.

<Huffer, don't you see?> offered Ultra Magnus, <This could be our opportunity to end the war. These creatures have powerful weapons. As long as we abide by our agreement, we'll be rid of Shockwave and all the rest forever!>



<I'm afraid the debate will have to wait,> said Mirage. <I've got a visual on their shuttles. They're coming in fast.>

\*\*\*\*\*

Chief Hatora, the senior non-com on the *Indy*, could see the target area. He could see six, ten meter tall automatons guarding the tunnel that lead to the super computer. There were sure to be more underground. The seven remaining shuttles were in a delta formation and diving. "*Cullen* to shuttle fleet: pick a target." He added under his breath, "Let's rattle the razorfly's nest."

He tapped the tactical control, "Firing 'rat trap.'"

\*\*\*\*\*

Ramjet's red optical sensor looked skyward. He zoomed in on the apparent shooting star. <Federation shuttles, incoming,> he broadcast.

Shockwave ordered from the depths, <I should have had you finish the job before. Seekers, transform and attack.>

Ramjet, Skywarp, and Jetstorm made running leaps. In a maelstrom of moving metal, they became fighter craft. With a burst from their afterburners, they shot up.

Dirge and two others paused just slightly, but it was enough to seal their fate. As the tardy Seekers left the chrome surface, an explosion reverberated through the thin atmosphere. The Mark 22 created a barely visible shockwave of electromagnetic energy.

The first three fighters managed to outrun the sphere; the last three did not. Their electrical systems failed, forcing them into status lock. They fell ungracefully to the metallic ruins below.

\*\*\*\*\*

The senior chief grimaced. With a hint of dismay, he called, "*Cullen* to *Indy*: the 22 was only 50 percent effective."

If to emphasize the failure, nearly a dozen Decepticons swarmed out of the tunnel. He grimly continued, "...and it didn't have an effect underground."

"Understood. Do your best, Chief."

A second 'rat trap' was already away. This one brought down an additional two jets. A flurry of pulse blurts shimmied the shuttle.

"Cullen to Sharlin," he said, "Hold off using your 22's. They're too scattered and too close to us, now."

"Aye."

\*\*\*\*\*

"I'd defiantly say they're distracted," said Windslow as he vocalized the obvious.

The order from Ultra Magnus came verbally over the intercom. "Autobots, roll out!"

With an orchestra of engines, the group accelerated quickly toward the passage that led to Vector Sigma. Sintina gunned the Starfleet jeep. They barreled over the occasional piece of debris. They were abreast of the apparent leader of the group of Autobots left on Cybertron. The chief engineer nervously looked over. He obviously hoped Aurelia wouldn't get too wrapped up in the moment and take point away from Ultra Magnus.

The group was in sight of the entrance. With a sudden violence, a purple jet flew out of the dark tunnel, pulled up, and transformed in mid-air. It returned to the ground as a humanoid with a heavy thud. It was Cyclonus. The Autobots screeched to a halt. To her credit, so did Sintina.

An armored, blue, wheeled vehicle exited the darkness as well. It seemed to be a mobile communications platform. Slowly and methodically, it changed form as well. Until, it ultimately revealed another Decepticon. He sported a mean looking shoulder cannon. Its face had a visor over its eyes and mouth seemed to be covered by armor. It spoke in Federation standard. It wanted the fleshlings to hear him. He had a deeply computerized, uncharismatic, yet chilling voice, "Ravage, Laserbeak, Rumble prepare for battle. Operation: warfare. Eject."

## CHAPTER 18

### **Supplemental Vector Sigma Away Team On the Surface of Cybertron**

At the command of 'eject,' a panel on the new Decepticon's torso opened. In quick succession, three hexagonal cylinders were flung out of the cavity. All transformed before they hit the ground.

The first formed the familiar panther-like robot. Ravage landed gracefully, but didn't stay still for long. It perfectly mimicked the pounce of a large cat and smashed onto the roll cage of the vehicle containing the captain. It snapped down at her.

The second 'minion' was Laserbeak. It immediately made a strafing run on the Autobots, still in their alternate modes. Both Ultra Magnus and Kup sustained superficial damage.

Rumble, the third pod. Hit the ground in the form of a semi-humonoid, one meter tall, robot. He was small, but he moved quickly. The automaton ran, in a frenzy, to the second buggy. It scrambled up the hood and grabbed one of the security officers with prong-like fingers. It all happened so quickly. With one 'hand' Rumble latched onto the officer's TEVA. The other transformed into a drill-type device. In a blur, the agile machine forced the drill into the officer's helmet. There was only a puff of air and blood and the appendage was removed.

The large Autobot transport repositioned innumerable parts in a matter of seconds. When it was over the 10 meter tall Ultra Magnus lunged at Cyclonus. With a massive clang, Magnus delivered a powerful uppercut to the Decepticon, causing Cyclonus to topple.

Before she knew what was happening, Ensign Lemipil saw Kup, in humanoid form, grab Ravage off the top of the Starfleet vehicle and throw the cat into the side of a nearby building. Kup commented in an elderly voice, "Bad kitty!"

Now that Captain Aurelia wasn't looking down Ravage's mechanical gullet, she saw the plight of her security team in the other buggy. One was already dead. The remaining two were attempting to fight off the squiring robot.

<Hey, Wheeljack,> boasted Sideswipe, <watch me take out Soundwave!> The red racer sped toward the blue Decepticon.

The Autobot engineer followed the impulsive 'swipe. <Wait!>

The caution fell on deaf ears. The hovercar neared Soundwave's right foot.

Unfortunately, the Decepticon reacted in time. He raised his foot and slammed it back down on the vehicle form of Sideswipe. The hovercar hit the deck with a metallic bang.

The racer was pinned.

Soundwave targeted the white Autobot. His shoulder cannon re-adjusted and fired. The plasma hit its mark. Wheeljack spun wildly out of control and headed for a precipice.

The Autobot Mirage, also a former racer, attempted to save the engineer, but he couldn't cover the distance in time. Wheeljack plummeted off the roadway.

<Wheeljack!> communicated the trapped Autobot. Rage consumed Sideswipe. He desperately attempted to transform beneath Soundwave's heavy foot, but it was futile.

Captain Aurelia felt useless. Her crew was being attacked by the small Rumble, but it was moving too fast. It jetted in and around the other vehicle. It would be too dangerous to fire at it with the phase cannon. Even with rifles, it was difficult. She throttled their buggy to close the distance.

Energy blasts pelted Huffer. He transformed into an automaton. Laserbeak was attacking him. "I should have stayed home," he complained. A small weapon emerged from his forearm. He returned fire, but hit nothing.

Two massive 'feet' collided with Magnus' frame as Cyclonus counter-attacked. The Autobot stumbled back, allowing time for the Seeker leader to return upright. The Decepticon produced a gun...by human standards, it was a cannon. He leveled it at the former cargo carrier, "Why do you insist on tainting Cybertron with this organic filth, Magnus?"

"Better organics than Decepticons," he rejoined. As he did, he fired a small, arm-mounted rocket at his opponent.

Cyclonus swiftly contorted his body to avoid the projectile and fired his weapon in kind.

Magnus was hit on the upper left torso. He loudly fell to one knee and cupped the wound, which 'bleed' glowing blue ooze.

Clanging with each step, Kup ran to aid Sideswipe. He discharged his weapon at Soundwave as he advanced. The 'con was hit twice and was forced to release his underfoot captive.

The hovercar didn't immediately move. Try as he might, 'swipe couldn't move or transform. He was damaged more than he thought.

Once Soundwave recovered, his cannon locked on to the elder Autobot. His weapon discharged a pulse of violet colored plasma. It impacted Kup at center mass.

Kup's glowing, blue eyes flickered for a moment. Even with his mechanical features, by looking at him, one could tell the 'life' had left his face. The robot fell to his knees. Smoke drifted from his open mouth. The blue light from his eyes finally went dark. The rest of his large, listless body collapsed unceremoniously to the cold, metal ground.

"Get out of the vehicle so we can get a shot!" commanded Lemipil to her two security officers. They began to run in the direction of the jeep with Aurelia. The temporary, Zakdorn security chief took a few pot shots at the offending Rumble. She still couldn't get a hit. Aurelia joined the effort with her rifle from the driver's seat. Windslow remained nearly motionless under his protective armor. Finally, after several attempts, a phaser pulse ripped half of the machine's torso away. It dropped to the deck with a clatter.

The security officers paused in their dash. Everyone seemed to take a moment to breathe. Sintina secured her rifle to a grab point.

It was at that moment when death literally fell from the sky. No one saw it coming. One of the Decepticon fighter craft transformed several meters above them. It squashed one of the security personnel with its foot as it landed. The TEVA suit gave little resistance to the immense weight. There was an audible 'pop' as the protective armor was compromised. Atmosphere and entrails burst out of what was left.

Before anyone could react, the Decepticon lifted back up into the sky and was gone.

The remaining four Starfleet officers were speechless. Aurelia finally brought everyone back. "Ok people, we can't stay here. Windslow, Lemipil, get into the other jeep. Crewman, you're with me."

\*\*\*\*\*

Hatora witnessed the gruesome scene below. "By the One," he commented. He was jolted again by weapons' fire. Glancing at his displays, he discovered his shields were at 46 percent. The Decepticon fighters didn't pack much a punch, but they were fast and much more maneuverable than the shuttles. Even with operational tactical scanners, it was difficult to get a lock. It was time to call in backup. He activated the com, "*Cullen to Independence.*"

\*\*\*\*\*

On the bridge, bin Nadal could only watch and wait. After about ten seconds, though it felt like many gut-wrenching minutes, the call finally came.

The XO responded, "This is the *Indy*. Go ahead."

*"I think we've drawn out as many hostiles as we can."*

It was the word Karim was waiting for. He snapped into action. "Understood, we're coming in." He ordered to an eager Mr. Dorian, "No need to play possum anymore. Bring up the mains." Then, he walked up to the free-standing tactical station behind the captain's chair. "Don't take this personally, Runningfox," offered Karim as he gestured for him to relinquish the post, "but we need the most experience person manning the weapons."

Though disappointed, the young enlisted crew member yielded with an, "Of course, sir."

The former tactical chief manipulated the controls. "Raising shields; arming weapons." He said to D'nas at the helm, "Ensign, take us down." He added with a malicious grin, "I want them to be able to read our registry number."

## CHAPTER 19

### **Supplemental** **Vector Sigma Away Team** **On the Surface of Cybertron**

Cyclonus held his weapon on the injured Ultra Magnus. “You’re kind disgusts me Autobot. You’re disruption prevents any chance of our race rising to power.” He aimed, “This is your end, Magnus.”

A dark shadow swept over the already dim landscape. Everyone paused long enough to glance up. The unmistakable silhouette of a *Steamrunner*-class starship blocked the distant stars.

Sintina couldn’t help herself. She gazed up at the ship. It was majestic. It was massive. She’d probably never have an opportunity to see the *Indy* quite like this again. Under its hull, a fighter gave chase to a shuttle and fired upon it.

Ensign Lemipil could just barely be heard over the shared channel. “Go get ‘em *Indy*.”

The leader of the Decepticon Seekers said in shock, “What?” He saw the ventral phaser strip light up at opposite ends. Cyclonus had seen it before. “By the Pit.” In a matter of seconds, the Starfleet ship had picked off three fighters from the sky. The rest of his warriors began to scatter in the face of this new onslaught. <I gave no order to disengage!> he thundered.

<We’re no match for that thing!> came from a fleeing Skywarp.

Cyclonus looked over at Soundwave just in time to see him take a hit from one of the alien ground units. Then, he turned his head to see Magnus’ smirking face. The Decepticon screamed out in a primal way. In his rage, he shot the large Autobot twice: once in the existing wound, the other to the face. The former went right through the hand that was covering the old wound. The latter tore off all the armor on Magnus’ head, exposing mechanics and circuitry. The Autobot fell. His weight caused a minor tremor.

The Decepticon quickly assessed the situation. Only the small Autobot was still actively fighting. The flesh creatures were wearing down Soundwave. All his Seekers and Laserbeak had left the battle. It was time to cut their losses. In the underground chamber, Shockwave would be on his own.

<Soundwave...> He looked over. The Decepticon communications specialist was already in status lock on the deck.

A painful blast from the organics slammed into Cyclonus' arm. He shot dagger with his eyes. Then, he jumped off the same precipice that had taken Wheeljack.

To Aurelia's discontent, the large robot flew back into view; this time in his fighter mode. She watched the final Decepticon jet out of sight. With a sudden relief, she gazed up to see the *Indy* completing its long, slow pass overhead. It was gaining altitude again. She activated her com, "Ground team to Independence. Thanks for the assist."

Chief Hatora's voice cut in, *"That goes for the shuttle squadron as well, Indy."*

*"It was our pleasure,"* said Karim. He continued, *"Captain, it looks like your team is good to go. Shuttles maintain a holding pattern, just in case the hostiles return."*

Aurelia observed the battle ground to see *who* was still a part of her team. Sideswipe, slowly...and apparently painfully...was transforming. He and the small, Huffer seemed to be the only mechanical allies they had left. Both had injuries. She replied to the *Indy*, "Understood, we're heading down." Then, the captain turned on the exterior speaker, "Why don't you guys stay here. We can get the job done from here."

"Fine by me," volunteered the two meter tall Huffer.

The former racer, however, was less enthused. He just finished the transformation process into a humanoid. "No offense, but I want to make sure the job...*our job*...gets done."

Aurelia realized she didn't have to compromise with the disabled 'bot. "Alright," she said, "but good luck keeping up with us." She continued on the mission channel, "Windslow, let's go."

The disgraced captain was merely an observer in recent events. It happened so quickly and with so much confusion, there simply hadn't been time to be scared. Still in a type of fog, his foot pressed the jeep's accelerator and he followed the other buggy into the blackened tunnel.



Sideswipe looked around. Kup and Ultra Magnus' chassis littered the chrome ground. Wheeljack would be damn lucky if he survived the fall. ...Not to mention Trailbreaker. He hobbled closer to Huffer, who making some self-repairs, <Yeah, this was worth it.>

<That's what I said from the beginning, but no...nobody listens to me.>

<Huffer.>

<Yeah.>

<Shut up.>

'Swipe then limped into the same darkness that enveloped the two buggies.

\*\*\*\*\*

The way was lit by the jeeps' headlamps. The hum of their engines echoed off the cavernous walls. There was a light ahead. Within a few minutes, they entered a huge, cylindrical shaped chamber. In the center was a faceted orb, Vector Sigma. It was about 20 meters in diameter and glowed a soft yellow. Attached to its base, via power conduits, was the warp core. As they rounded the spherical super computer, something new caused Sintina to slam on the brakes. Her heart skipped a beat.

It was a huge automaton, topping 15 meters. It was armed to the teeth and prominently displayed the icon of the Decepticons.

Lemipil and the other security officer trained their phase cannons on it.

The short ride into the deep, allowed Windslow to experience terror. The sight of the new Decepticon caused his flight reaction to surface. He wanted nothing more than to turn around and bolt out of there. To his credit, he didn't.

To everyone's relief, it acted more like a statue than anything else. It didn't move or react at all to their presence.

The chief engineer offered his opinion, "It may not be activated."

Aurelia only rejoined with, "Let's unpack the anti-grav units and tow cables and get the hell out of here."

"It'll take me a minute to figure out what they did to the core and disconnect it," Windslow said.

"Fine, we'll cover you."

\*\*\*\*\*

On the bridge, Commander bin Nadal glimpsed at the chronometer. The operation was into its fifth minute. He had asked the question before, but inquired again. "Is there anyway we can get through?"

Kimula, currently manning communications, spun in her chair, "Karim, they're too deep. There's just too much heavy metal between us and them."

The problem had been anticipated, of course, but he hoped...

\*\*\*\*\*

Windslow decided to forgo finesse. He used a laser cutter to disconnect the power couplings. It wasn't the safest...or smartest thing to do, but it was the quickest. He made the final cut, "That's it. Crewman, use the mini-tractor to place the core on the anti-grav units."

The security officer began to use the tripod device when a blast of plasma annihilated him, the tractor, and the buggy he was next to. All went up in a quickly vanishing ball of flame.

Sintina immediately found the source of the destruction. She was all too familiar with the robot. Shockwave entered from an adjacent corridor. His cannon glowed with anticipation of another discharge.

In a booming voice, he declared, "I like the reactor where it is."

Lacking a weapon, Windslow took cover.

Lempil saw the Commander's dash before she opened fire with the phase cannon. Utilizing her rifle, Sintina joined in the assault.

The phaser pulses proved rather effective. With each shot, Shockwave stumbled back. He tried to return fire, but the barrage coming from the jeep was relentless. Sparks, smoke, and energon flowed from the massive

Decepticon. Soon, he simply attempted to shield himself from the onslaught. He was forced to the wall. Still the attack came.

A demonic grimace formed on Sintina's lips and she depressed the trigger, again and again.

Finally, the ten meter tall robot slid to the deck. His 'eye' continued to glow, but there was no other movement. His armor had been compromised in several places. Scorch marks and loose components covered his body.

Sideswipe entered in time to see the mighty fall. He laboriously walked over to get a better look. "You did it," he blurted, "You defeated Shockwave."

The Decepticon's head rose slightly. "Captain...you are condemning us to extinction. Your own laws forbid genocide...that is exactly what you are doing."

Aurelia still held her rifle on the machine. She was sorely tempted to end it there, but she responded. "No. I didn't do this to you. You did it. Species kill themselves all the time."

Having failed with the organic, Shockwave pleaded his case to his brethren. "Sideswipe, don't you see? That reactor is the only way Cybertronians will survive...Decepticon...or Autobot. Don't let them take it."

All eyes rested on the Autobot. He took a few steps. Then he looked at Aurelia, "Do you know what will happen once you leave?"

She slowly got out of the jeep and tapped a button on her arm twice. She thoughtfully asked, "What?"

"There will be 46 Decepticons and eight Autobots. We'll still hide...We'll still be hunted. Nothing will change."

Lemipil dismounted the buggy as well and cautiously walked away from it.

Sideswipe continued, "If we are ever to rebuild, we'll need Vector Sigma. We'll need power."

Captain found her officers; both were a relatively safe distance from the jeep. "The core is coming with me." She pressed and held another control on her forearm.

The buggy exploded from the inside. It was enough to obliterate the vehicle, but the real power of the Mark 22 warhead was the electro-magnetic pulse it produced. It forced Aurelia to the ground. Sideswipe collapsed to the floor as if he were a puppet with its strings cut. Shockwave's eye dimmed and the warp core went into emergency lockdown, just as if it were installed in a vessel.

The moment of chaos stopped. Total darkness was a side effect of the device. Not even the lights on the TEVA's worked.

Lempil screamed in her helmet, hoping there was enough atmosphere to carry her call outside her suit. "Is everybody ok?"

There was a faint reply, though she was probably yelling as well. It was Captain Aurelia, "I'm alright."

The security officer spoke a bit contemptuously, "Commander, are you safe?"

"Yes." The muffled voice continued, "We're going to have to go back up the shaft and call for help to get the core out of here."

"Well," concluded Aurelia, "Let's get the hell out of here."

## EPILOGUE

### **Supplemental Vector Sigma Away Team On the Surface of Cybertron**

As the trio exited the tunnel, there were already two shuttles on the deck. One of the shuttlepods was off loading a pair of anti-grav units.

Huffer walked up to Aurelia, "Well, what happened?"

She transmitted externally and over the com, "Chief Hatora. Target the remaining Autobot with your phasers."

*"Aye, ma'am."*

The two meter tall robot stepped back, "What's going on?"

"Leave this area, now," demanded the captain.

Huffer was surrounded. He was right...You can't believe organics. "We trusted you," he blasted.

"Now!" repeated Aurelia.

The Autobot moved back. He reluctantly transformed and left.

She addressed the chief engineer, "Windslow, get that core up here ASAP."

There was a pause. ... "Yes, Captain."

\*\*\*\*\*

Less than an hour later, Mirage observed the last alien craft leave his home; their precious warp core and anti-matter pods in tow. Cybertron was quite once again. He deactivated his cloak and solemnly walked up to Kup.

The elder Autobot's spark had been damaged. There was no hope of fixing him. Mirage hefted up the hulk and hid the body. He didn't want to Decepticons to scavenge Kup for parts.

Mirage returned for Ultra Magnus. His leader's spark was still intact, but it would take centuries to scrounge up the raw materials to affect repairs. He'd need help to haul Magnus. <Huffer...come in Huffer. I need your help.>

\*\*\*\*\*

**Stardate: 54042.1 (16 January 2377)**  
**USS Independence, Ready Room**  
**In Orbit of Cybertron**

Sintina asked Karim dispassionately, "How are we for personnel?"

The XO took the loss a bit more personally, "We lost eight people. Windslow is down some essential engineering posts and we lost a whole shift's worth of security personnel. Those divisions will have to go to twelve hour rotations to keep up."

She stated, "We need to start cross-training people to lessen the effect in the future."

Karim nodded to his captain. She put up a good, professional front. He absently concurred, "Good idea, ma'am."

Aurelia added, "I've sent a request in to Starfleet for new people, including a new security chief. It will be a few months, due to our location."

"Of course," bin Nadal said. "I got a call from one of Nechayev's people. He assured me any new people assigned to this ship will be screened first."

Sintina was warming up for a rant about her first officer's access to the former Fleet Admiral when the enunciator sounded. The captain spoke up, "Come in."

Lieutenant Tang entered her office. He held a data padd. The Asian science officer sounded proud and nervous at the same time. "Captain, I didn't have time to tell you this earlier, but I knew it was a goal of yours...and I asked Wheeljack to help...He found it."

She raised her hands, "Found what, Lieutenant?"

"The Section 31 override programs," he blurted. "Wheeljack eliminated them."

Windslow shifted in his chair to address the science officer, "You and Windslow have been working on that for months."

"...and we couldn't even find them," Tang added.

A genuine smile crossed Sintina's face. She felt gratitude...and then shame. "Good thinking, asking the Autobot for help," she said, realizing the irony of the statement.

Tang Zian offered the padd, "He also was able to give us access to the prefix code program. Here's my full report."

Her tone didn't reflect her words, "This makes my day, thanks Lieutenant. Dismissed."

As the door closed, bin Nadal put salt in the wound, "They did honor their end of the bargain, Sintina...and then some."

She stood from her seat and gazed out the window. She examined the irregular, metal sphere that hung in space, wishing they never changed course...but they had. *She* had. Sintina always believed in rewarding virtue. Despite Sideswipe's comments, the Autobots had demonstrated trustworthiness. Without turning around, she asked, "How many shuttles have we lost on this mission?"

The first officer consulted his padd, "Five. We'll have the shuttle fleet back up to full strength in about six weeks."

Aurelia turned, "What's left of the *Frazi*?"

"It's not that bad, really...a hull breach. That'll be one of the easy ones to repair."

She stepped closer, "No, it was totally destroyed."

"Ma'am?"

"Order its autopilot to land near the northern pole, in Autobot territory."

Karim stood, "Captain, that shuttle still has its warp drive and phasers intact. If we do that, we could be prolonging their war...and their suffering."

“Without their help,” Sintina justified, “we’d be very cold and dying right now.”

“With respect, I don’t think that’s a good idea...” he began.

Aurelia said softly, but with authority, “That’s you’re right to think that, Commander. Now kindly shut up.”

Bin Nadal long ago knew he had to pick his battles when Sintina was concerned. He decided this wasn’t one of them. “Yes, ma’am.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Captain Aurelia stood in front of the command chair. All were at their posts. “Bridge to Engineering, can we leave yet?”

Windslow’s voice answered, “*At your discretion, Captain.*”

“Very well.” She made eye contact with Dorian at Ops, “Deploy the warning beacon.”

“Aye, beacon away.”

A moment later, Kimula reported, “the buoy is transmitting on all channels, ma’am.”

The captain looked back at Ensign Lemipil. “Arm photon launchers. Target Kolkular and make sure our original landing shuttle is destroyed as well.”

Karim avoid looking at Sintina. Her word was something she prized. He understood, and already voiced his opinion.

The Latino captain observed the target area on the main screen. The *Frazi* had landed, unmanned, a few minutes before. It was time to fulfill her oath and leave this place. Her command was lackluster, “Fire.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Four red photon torpedoes exited the *Independence’s* aft launchers as it broke orbit.



\*\*\*\*\*

Cyclonus examined the disabled alien shuttle. He detected the same type of power source as the mothership. It was an anti-matter reactor, though, much smaller. It was still, by far, the largest power source on the planet. <Perhaps this encounter wasn't a total loss,> he thought.

Something in the sky caught his eye...four glowing lights. They were heading toward him. He assumed his fate. <Slag.>

\*\*\*\*\*

Sintina watched as a plume of fire rose from the dark planet. She sat down. "D'nas ...resume course and engage at warp seven."

**END**