As the final two combatants circled each other warily, Lio Convoy’s servos unconsciously tightened around his Solipsistic Staff. A pile of rusted detritus, no doubt the remains of some ancient structure, hid him from the combatants. Though the Staff kept him from appearing on any of the countless holographic imagers ubiquitous in the domed ruins that were once the magnificent city of Mebion, it provided no such protection from the optics of Maximal or Predacon. He was unperturbed; Quickstrike and Stinkbomb had more urgent concerns.

“You don’t reckon you can beat me, do you Maxie?” quipped the Predacon, his tail flickering dangerously to and fro, an almost hypnotic display. Odd to have a tail in humanoid configuration, mused Lio Convoy. His work was nearly complete; the number of combatants had remained at parity during this concours, thanks in no small part to Lio Convoy’s subtle interventions. If he had once felt any guilt at betraying his Maximal heritage, it was long since subsumed in the grim but sure knowledge that his was a higher calling than the petty tribalism of those he moderated.

Stinkbomb’s retort was not verbal, but instead a barrage of noxious chemicals spraying forth from a nozzle where his left hand had been mere seconds before. Unexpectedly, Quickstrike dove forward, under the deluge, closing the distance between them. Shrewd move, thought Lio Convoy. His presence was hardly necessary at this point. Whichever of the combatants prevailed, the contest had been a close one. The parity between Maximal and Predacon so critical to the stability of Cybertronian society had been preserved.

Voyeuristic instincts getting the better of him, Lio Convoy risked shifting a few steps closer to the action. While he could certainly see this battle played out, from a variety of angles, on the holoscan later that evening, it just wasn't the same thing. He supposed that was why the elite among the Builders traded huge portions of their Energon reserves for the privilege of sitting on the dome surrounding the Mebius Arena and peering into lens-based image enhancers. The intimacy of knowing that you were processing the actual photons bouncing off combatants who were soon to be extinguished was incomparable.

Maximal and Predacon were a tangle of limbs, the endgame here at last. Neither was the largest nor strongest among their respective teams, nor the fastest nor the smartest. However this struggle resolved, the oddsmakers and gambling dens were sure to keep the lion's share of wagers placed. Lio Convoy had no interest in such things, even were he allowed to indulge in such Builder vices.

Finally, the seemingly interminable clash came to its end. No more grunts of exertion, no more witticisms, no more valor or cowardice or posturing. Stinkbomb had scampered back a short distance, raising the twin barrels of his chemical weapon into his opponent's face. He didn't notice the tear in the line leading to the nozzle, his diagnostics no doubt overwhelmed by the abundance of injuries large and small he had received over the three-day battle. It was a fatal error. Though his opponent froze for a fraction of a second, thinking that his own end was here, Quickstrike realized almost instantly that his opponent was disarmed. He sprang to his feet, twisted his proboscis into something approximating a grin, aimed his tail and fired. Stinkbomb collapsed backwards with carmine smoke seeping from his juddering form.
The green and yellow Predacon, sole survivor of Battle MCMXXIII, took a long moment to simply stand there. Lio Convoy wondered what was going through his processor. Relief, certainly. Pride, no doubt. He had just joined the elite of Predacon society. Then he planted his bootstrut on his vanquished opponent and raised both arms into the air. "Yee-haw! Ah reckon that makes me the victor. Predacons, forever!" Lio Convoy could almost hear the cheers coming from the Predacons all over the planet, and from those Builders who had in a former life called themselves Decepticons. Deep in his spark, he felt the stillwater sensation of accomplishment; once again, the fragile balance that made life on Cybertron possible had been preserved.

The looming spire that held the Gladitorial Administration Bureau offices dominated the landscape as far as the optic could see. It was an ugly complex, with architecture that was almost but not quite haphazard. Jagged minarets and unseemly gaps agglutinated to form its superstructure, infested with thrusting antennae and greedy dishes to transmit and receive to every parcel of land on the once-mighty planet of Cybertron. Lio Convoy suppressed a shudder at the sight of it, as he always did. The Cybertronix acid-etched over the main entrance proclaimed it to be The Cyclonus Memorial Tower, but everyone had always called it the Cortex.

Two Builders stood guard at the front entrance, scowls writ across their faces. Though tiny by the standards of their races, these 'Micro Masters' still stood head and shoulder above Lio Convoy's frame. He gave a wry grin; he was considered tall by Maximal standards.

"Somethin' funny?" It was the Builder with the vestigial Autobot symbol, a gray behemoth. He took a menacing step forward. Lio Convoy swallowed his pride and bowed his head in feigned obeisance.

"I was merely contemplating the vagaries of chance as it relates to the most recent Game, honored Builder." After so many decades of playing out this scene, the obsequious tone came almost naturally. Almost.

"Back off, Barrage. I know this Maxie. He's tame." Lio Convoy did indeed know this Builder, a purple-limbed brute who went by Half-Track. Two huge red cannons the size of an average Maximal's leg protruded from the back of the former Decepticon. The words spilled out of his mouth in an overeager fashion, making them difficult to understand. This was a contentious 'bot, no doubt picking an argument with his so-called partner because long experience had taught him Lio Convoy wouldn't rise to the bait. He restrained his comrade by gripping Barrage's shoulder tightly.

Barrage wasted no time shrugging it off and pivoting aggressively to his fellow Builder. "Don't get cocky just because your team won last night. Supersonic said it himself in the postgame analysis, that fight could have gone either way."
The black and purple Builder took most of a step back and smirked. "Didn't, though." Half-Track held out his servo without bothering to break eye contact with his agitated counterpart. "Papers, please."

Naturally, Lio Convoy had them already in hand, though in theory his Staff made him exempt from such requirements. Half-Track glanced from Barrage for just long enough to project the red laser cross upon the alternating black-and-white lines of coded information on Lio Convoy's Personal Registration Of Official Function card. PROOF of his right to exist. "You're clear. The Administrator will see you now. Best not to keep him waiting."

The Administrator's office was on the summit, seventy-one stories above the dilapidated buildings of Thetacon. Between the lift and the office was the cacophony of the GAB operations center, two pits each full of dozens of monitors and holoscans. Each held a gargantuan Builder. Countless trips to the office of The Administrator over the decades had taught him that the dark gray Builder with the monocle was Zoom Out and the gold and black Builder was Slog. Both were adorned with ancient, tarnished Decepticon symbols. Interred here before Lio Convoy was protoformed, they were as incapable of moving as nearly all Builders, rusted gears and ancient servomotors frozen in place. A tangle of cables hardwired them into their sepulchral nests. Zoom Out paid him no heed as he walked through their dominion, beneath notice of even a 'bot who saw everything, while Slog spared him a perfunctory glower of pure hatred.

Naturally, the heavy fluro-steel double-doors were shut when Lio Convoy arrived. He held his PROOF to the optical scanner on the door's controls and observed it go from red to yellow. Not green. The Administrator was aware of his presence but hadn't granted him entrance. Forms must be followed, rituals observed. Lio Convoy waited. His mind returned to the Games. He once again saw the noble savagery of the Predacons as they entered the Arena, the swagger of brave Maximals as they too prepared to do battle. After a long moment, the LED flashed green and the doors slid open.

The room never failed to impress. It took up the entire western half of the floor, with huge external windows overlooking the ancient city below. The cathedral ceilings made any who entered feel insignificant. They could accommodate all but the largest of the ancient Builders, including those too massive to move without the aid of exo-walkers in these energon-starved times. The wall with the door inset was a crystalline matrix that normally displayed feats of athletic prowess from every conceivable sport on the planet, though it could also become one-way transparent and provide The Administrator with a view of his immediate domain. Two lines of text scrolled along the bottom of the monitor, keeping The Administrator up-to-date on the various goings-on of mecha-soccer, racing, basketrek, pugilism, track-and-field, lobbing, volleyblast, marksmanship, even retro-rodeo.

One corner was given over to trophies, awards, memorabilia, and keepsakes. Most were from the nearly two thousand Games that had been run betwixt Maximal and Predacon in the modern era. Here was the Carnage Clamp of Scissor Boy from his incredible triumph over four Predacon warriors; there was the machete wielded by Killer Punch when he blindsided Ultra Mammoth during one of the hated Culls. A few of the artifacts predated this current age, predated even the Great War, from the previous spasm of gladiatorial violence in the days
when Builders were young and "Autobot" and "Decepticon" were just words in manifestos. One particularly battered piece of memorabilia, an unimpressive purple rod covered in carbon scoring, was brightly illuminated as it slowly rotated in a magnetic field. It purported to be the Energon Mace of Megatron himself.

Opposite this conspicuous display was a gargantuan desk, sized for a Builder of above-average stature. This was where The Administrator held court. The Administrator himself was small for a Builder, though larger than the Micro Masters who routinely stood guard or patrolled. Builders any larger than he couldn't remain mobile on a standard energon ration and were thus seldom seen in public. His carapace was blue and gray, with gold accents, twin cannons protruding from his back. He was currently behind the desk, standing, staring out the window and gazing over the decaying city.

With servos folded behind his back, Lio Convoy waited patiently to be acknowledged. Despite this display, he thought that The Administrator genuinely liked him. He often had some advice or aphorism to share. On the few occasions that Lio Convoy had erred, he took the opportunity to give constructive criticism rather than threats. After a long moment, The Administrator spoke. "You know, you can observe a lot just by watching."

Not entirely certain if a response was appropriate, Lio Convoy approached the desk. "As you say, Administrator." The gray Builder gave a slight chuckle at the title Administrator. Several times over the decades, he had told Lio Convoy to call him by his name, Eject, but Lio Convoy never felt entirely comfortable with that level of familiarity.

"Look at you, slugger, always toeing the line. There's a reason you were chosen to play umpire in these Games." The Administrator slowly turned, venerable pistons creaking slightly. He regarded Lio Convoy intensely, eyes lingering on, or perhaps just behind, the Maximal's chest, as they occasionally had over the years. It was a strangely uncomfortable moment. After a few nano-kliks too long, the grand master of the Games continued. "It's sad, really. Maximal and Predacon, you were created to carry the torch for us. Prove to Them that we had it in us to be more than just automatons, slugging it out in the ever-dwindling battlefields They left us. Instead, here we are, continuing with the infighting until we're down for the count."

Despite himself, Lio Convoy felt himself drawing closer, his body uncharacteristically betraying his interest. This was new. "They, Administrator?"

"Yeah, They. Them. You know, I finally saw the last of the films? It's actually the middle one, our satellites didn't happen to pick up 'Catching Fire' until just a few orbital cycles ago. Of course, it was first broadcast centuries ago, but the speed of light's always been a sticky wicket." Lio Convoy began to make confused noises, but The Administrator plowed on. "Four hundred years on, and They're still giving us all our best ideas. When we met Them, they weren't even in the same league with us. Now we're the second stringers, blockaded from going more than a few dozen parsecs away from the home field. We don't shape up and we may be stuck on just a single planet before too long. If that happens, we may as well throw in the towel."

Many of the words were meaningless, but enough of the sense slipped through. Was The
Administrator looking to him for assistance? "And you would like me to help us... 'shape up?'"

The Builder gave a sad laugh that didn't reach his optics. "If only. Nope nope nope. Word just came down from on high. We're doing another Cull."

Lio Convoy took a step back and crossed his arms. "So soon?"

The Administrator's mouthplate was as ever an unreadable mask, but something about his eyes seemed to suggest a melancholy smile. "Powers that be." Coming from one as important as The Administrator, that phrase could only mean the Builder Assembly. "And, fair or not, Culls are always some of the best Games. Everyone knows that." The Builder's eyes had begun to sparkle, as they always did when he spoke of the excitement and glory of the spectacle. This was his addiction, Lio Convoy knew.

"Right now there are nineteen Predacon survivors since the last Cull and only eleven Maximals. So your job, champ, is to make sure the next win is in the Maximal column." His tone reached a crescendo, his excitement evident. He even raised his arms above his head, a non-trivial expenditure of effort for the enfeebled robot. "Not just a win, a landslide. Because if Game 1925 is a Cull, that leaves only one more battle to make things a little more even." Lio Convoy's expression must have soured, because The Administrator's tone softened. "Look, I know this came out of left field. I think everyone figured the next Cull for Game 2000. And I know you have a strong sense of fair play, which is why you're perfect for this job. You've got a couple of weeks between now and Game 1924. Relax, clear your mind, get your head back in the game. It's a dangerous world out there!"

The drive home afforded amble opportunities to think as day became twilight. Though the GAB had provided his flight from the Mebius Arena, in the stasis-locked shell of some etiolated Builder, he was expected to handle his own transportation from downtown Thetacon to the Maximal ghettos of Glibax. Rolling used less energy than walking, so he used his alternate form despite the ire it earned from the Builder patrols and checkpoints. Even the smallest and most mobile Builders would think long and hard before expending the energy necessary to transform.

His mind raced, fascinated to learn that the cosmos was out-of-reach in a way he'd never before considered as he drove into the gloam. Certainly, he'd learned of the ancient majesty of the Autobot Commonwealth of carefully eco-structured colonies, the brutal efficiency of the Decepticon Star Empire of conquered species, with Cybertron ever the prize between these sidereal polities. And, certainly, he knew that no such entities existed to this day. He'd just never thought to wonder how we had gone from there to here.

So, too, did he turn over the unwelcome news that the survivors of the Games were soon to be Culled. To survive a Game was to be granted double energon ration, excused from the need of a function of at least Class J, and given the ability to travel from city to city with a limited degree of freedom. Why, the winner of a Game was very nearly the equal of the lowest class of Builder.
But Builders didn't want a large population of free Maximals and Predacons about, rising to prominence and instigating trouble. From time to time a Game was designated a Cull, with all survivors since the last Cull returned to the arena to once again do battle. Most often they were hundred Games apart, four years of victors, and occasionally less frequent even than that. Culls provoked a powerful ambivalence among the Maximal and Predacon population; to watch survivors who had been through so much returned to the circuit grinder was profoundly unfair, and yet the Games were undeniably enthralling. Not only did any victor have a certain level of celebrity, but they had proven themselves on the battlefields of yesteryear. To have a Cull so soon, a mere year from the prior one, indicated that resources were more scarce than anyone had estimated.

Lio Convoy, too, was conflicted. True, the scarcity made him realize the importance of his function, to keep the balance in this fragile economy. On the other hand, it stoked the fires of resentment towards the moribund Builders, calcified in body and mind and consuming more than their share of the resources disproportionately harvested by Maximal and Predacon.

The slums of Glibax were in sight, if only barely, when Lio Convoy's spark painfully contracted, almost causing him to swerve off the road. As he turned into the spin to regain control, he noticed a burst of light and gamma rays in the sky followed immediately by what looked to be a shooting star plummeting towards Cybertron. On any other day, perhaps, he would have ignored it, left it to the Builders or MCSF to manage what was obviously out of his prevue. But the words of The Administrator rang in his auditory sensors, and Lio Convoy was filled with an unexpected yearning for an age when the stars were not so out-of-reach. Before he had fully processed the situation, he had shifted off the permitted boulevard and was heading straight for the impact site in the interstitial space that was the vast Cybertronian wasteland.

Builders didn't regularly patrol the shanties of Predacons or the squalors of Maximals, and even the Maximal Command Security Forces were rare in their outskirts, so Lio Convoy knew he'd have at least a few cycles undisturbed to investigate this celestial intruder. It didn't take him long to find the crater, radiating infrared in the demolished shell of what might once have been a fueling station or a parts depot but had been long ago demolished by countless millennia of war. He approached warily, shifting to his humanoid configuration with a quick "maximize" to better get a look at the glowing-hot metal. Something had crashed here, but whatever it was didn't seem to be here any longer. He glanced about nervously; it wouldn't do to be here when the inevitable Builder patrol arrived. Curiosity was not encouraged among the offspring races.

Still, he feared he wouldn't be able to forgive himself if he didn't at least try. "Is anyone there?"
My name is Lio Convoy. I'm a Max--I'm a Cybertronian." He thought he sensed... something, so he continued. "I mean you no harm," he said, without a trace of irony.

"Oh, something tells me you're far from harmless," he heard from behind him, a feminine voice, deep and throaty. He whirled around, his Staff materializing in his hands subconsciously. Should the voice belong to a hostile Maximal or Predacon, he could use it to disable her with a thought. He peered into the shadows, but saw nothing. From the darkness floated that scratchy voice. "Nice rod you've got there, Goldenboy. Trying to compensate for something?"

Lio Convoy's eyes narrowed for a moment, then he gave a hearty laugh. "Always, Mysterious Stranger. Always. But you don't want to be here when the Builders or the MCSF show up."

She emerged from the shadows with a regal flourish. The first thing he noticed were her eyes, an unusual yellow casting a surreal pallor to the debris she had ensconced herself within. As she closed, he realized, belatedly, that she was a riot of limbs, eight in total. She moved with a fluidity that made her appear strangely serene, and she had closed the distance between them before he had fully drank in her red-and-purple body, all curves and edges. He swallowed as she brought up one of her extra arms, back-mounted and terminating in a razor-sharp point. She ran it almost tenderly across the his chest, lingering on his embossed Maximal symbol. Absurdly, he was reminded of The Administrator's lingering gaze. "Wouldn’t want that, would we?"

Abruptly, she leapt back, her form contorting and reconfiguring, until he was staring at a six-legged wheeled car. After a beat, he followed her example and assumed his vehicular mode. Both of their engines idled for a long moment, as he subconsciously waited for her to take the lead. "Lead on, tall, gold and handsome. I’m not from around here." His reverie broken, he contemplated where to stash a fugitive. His domicile was too small, too risky. And he had no regular place of work--ah, that was it. Self-consciously, he shifted into gear and began to take a circuitous route to the closest arena, the domed-over ruins of Nyon some two megacycles distant.

As the tallest of the ancient towers of the Nyon Coliseum came into view over the horizon, Lio Convoy braked and shifted back to his primary mode, gesturing with his palm for the trailing femme to do the same. When she did so with a whispered “maximize” his spark skipped a beat. “What’s the plan, tiger?”

Wordlessly, he summoned his Staff from subspace. “Grip this.”

She arched an expressive brow. “Normally I’d make you buy me dinner first.” He just stared, and eventually she extended a dainty hand and took hold. “Not much for words, are you, goldenrod?”

Lio Convoy slowly shook his head. “Not unless I have something to say. The Solipsistic Staff
will shield us from any cameras in any arena. Come.” She smirked at the name, but otherwise offered no reaction.

The two of them crossed the deserted landscape hesitantly, optics darting about, but the arena and its environs were deserted. Theirs was an awkward closeness, necessitated by shared physical contact with his Staff. Soon they had navigated the twisting tunnels that provided what minimal maintenance needs the Coliseum required and were in the arena proper. They wended their way through pocked streets and clamored over tumbled walls until the superstructure of the Arena was hazy in the distance. With a sigh of relief, Lio Convoy sat on a pile of rubble where once he had distracted a Predacon, lest said combatant seize too early an advantage back in Game DCCCLXXII. She followed his lead, perching on the remains of what might once have been an industrial-grade energon reclamation unit, her right leg obscuring ancient graffiti too bleached from the sun’s harsh light to make out by the reflected glow of Cybertron’s chasmal moon.

After a long, silent moment, he dismissed his signature weapon. She cocked a questioning tilt to her head. “This arena is unmonitored when a Game is not in session.”

Her tone and two pairs of crossed arms were profoundly skeptical. “Oh? How can you be so sure?”

With a grand gesture, he swept his arms over the crumbling structures that was once a metropolis. “Like all arenas in the modern Games, the Nyon Coliseum was once a city. Unlike many, this one was too large to dome, and is thus open to the sky. Various stripes of mechanimals frequently nest among the ruins. These beasts often provided interesting sport during the Games, but more importantly make all but the most perfunctory security systems impractical. And the Builder who manages it is often... insouciant.”

“So formal? Have I hooked up with a tour guide? Or are you some kind of butler-bot?”

He ignored her mockery. “No. I am the Balancer, the Guardian of Order. I am he who must preserve our society, whatever the personal cost is to my own code of ethics. I am--”

Her staccato laughter cut him off mid-sentence. “You’re Patsy Prime, is what you’re telling me.”

A spike of anger rose in his breast. “And who are you, who fell from the sky, to judge me? Do you know our ways? Do you have PROOF of your right to be here?”

Without warning, she was off her perch and in his face. “PROOF? You want my, what was it, Personal Registration Of something or other? I threw that away decades ago when I left this scrap pile of planet behind for what I thought was the last time. I’ve spent years, YEARS fighting against tin-plated tyrants and those who would stand on the backs of others. And do you know what I learned?” She had by now backed away and was pacing manically. “I learned that the worst of the worst were those who perpetuated the so-called minor injustices of the present for the ‘greater good,’ better tomorrows that never seem to materialize. So don’t sell me your...
smog about how noble it is that you’re compromising your principles because you don’t want to upset the scrapplet cart.”

Lio Convoy staggered back as if struck. He had had doubts before, naturally. Who could look at the oppression in which Maximal and Predacon alike lived and think that the world was a just place. Who could perceive the stagnant and decrepit Builders, occupying the most important positions in society, and think that all was fair. And yet, he had known no other world, no other system. To tear down what was, in favor of what might be... it was a heady notion, to be sure, but a notion fraught with danger.

“I... I must dwell on your words, Mysterious Stranger. What you speak of is radical--no, it is heresy. But you will be safe, as long as you remain here.”

The inveigling Maximal took several steps backwards, never breaking eye contact. “Don’t wait too long. If things haven’t changed too much since my day, Games are held just over twice an orbital cycle. Sparks are being extinguished every nano-klik you ‘dwell.’”

A rustling noise by his left leg drew his eyes from hers. He spied a rustbug exploring and kicked it away, lest it attempt to digest his foot. It tumbled, converted into a primitive wheeled-form and scooted away. When he glanced back in her direction, she was gone, vanished into the night. He took a moment to drink in the nocturnal air and began the long trek back to his home.

Four days passed in comparative peace as he meditated, cross-legged, optics turned inward. From the first days he was protoformed, he had been drawn to the mindscape for reasons he could not fully articulate. The serenity of oneiric nothingness called to him. This discipline gave him an unusual facility for self-healing, allowing him to achieve with his own internal nanobots what most ‘bots would need a CR chamber for. But it wasn’t usually a physical healing he sought, but a mental one, and generally he was able to achieve it.

On this occasion, tranquility proved elusive. Beneath the glaciers of his eyes, his spark roiled. Gilbax had never seemed so chokingly oppressive to him. It was more than the mandatory Builder husk permanently ensconced in the highest structure, an obsessive parasite named Longtooth observing everything without compassion or pity. It was more than the industrial filth belched into the sky by the energon reclamation plants and rust-harvest mills and smelting pits that occupied the days and nights of the vast majority of Maximals. It was more than the incessant patrols from the Maximal Command Security Forces, stopping passerbys and demanding PROOF and more often than not incarcerating or fining the hapless ‘bot for some minor transgression. It was the entire system, the gestalt reality that was life on Cybertron.

By noon on the fifth day, the turmoil within him could no longer be contained. He left the two rooms allotted to him, an almost unheard-of luxury among Maximals, and took to the streets. For once, he did not summon his Staff, not wishing to hide behind the status of a Class-A
function. On some level, he was hungry for confrontation, an abstract
yearning he did not fully understand.

For over a megacycle, he wandered aimlessly, transitioning from the
moldering residential zone to the depressing glitz of the commerce district.
The angry glare of Longtooth followed his meanderings, if only in Lio
Convoy’s imagination. Other Maximals ignored him, going about their
business with a furtive nature that suggested they expected to be harassed
at any cycle. In his wanderings, the bright light of day became obscured by
the gathering of ominous magenta clouds.

Finally he found what he sought. Two members of a MCSF were in the process
of affixing stasis cuffs to some unlucky Maximal. The victim was below
average height, blue with gold tints, and possessed two magnificent horns
sprouting from the sides of his head. His arms were connected to his flank
by what looked to be wings, and these were giving the two security officers
some trouble as they attempted to maneuver his arms behind his back.
His speech was faintly musical. “I vas doing noo-ting wrong! Vhy are you
harassing me?”

The larger of the two MCSF thugs was attempting to maneuver the detainee’s
limbs into place. A white robot with red and gray highlights, he looked as if he
were designed for the frigid polar regions of Cybertron, rather than equatorial
Gilbax. The six spikes on his chest, three on each side, were particularly
threatening. Some part of Lio Convoy wondered if he hadn’t been reassigned here as
a punishment, some cruel Builder joke. Oppressor and oppressed were fluid concepts
in this space. “Nothing wrong,” growled the officer with a deep vibrato, “you are in
violation of Builder Assemblage Code 375.19 Gamma, Section 9, subsection 23.”

The small Maximal’s face momentarily blanked, the look of a ‘bot attempting to access the
Autopedia, apparently unaware that MCSF typically dampened all local area transmissions.
“I don’ know vat dat is.”

The other officer, standing a few mechanometers back, provided cover. He was taller
than his partner, though not as bulky, a black ‘bot with red and yellow trim. His most
distinguishing feature was an striking mane about his head. He idly tapped the flat of an
imposing golden scimitar on the palm of his hand. His voice was gravely, and he spoke with a
bored, officious edge vaguely reminiscent of a poor educator or world-weary bureaucrat. “It is
a crime to spend more than 90 nano-kliks observing one’s image in a mirror or other reflective
surface, punishable by no more than three days in lockup and slash or a fine of no more than
two days of a full-share energon ration."

The white guard had gotten one cuff locked into place when the diminutive Maximal displayed
an unexpected burst of anger and shrugged off the accosting robot. “You must be fragging
kidding me! Since ven is dat a crime? De Builder Assembly has nothing better dan to sit around
coming up with laws like des? And I’m only Class-D, it takes me five days labor to get two full-shares!”
With his blade waving in the general direction of the outraged ‘bot, the taller guard issued a blasé threat. “Stand down right now or you’ll face a charge of resisting, and you don’t want that. And you,” he said, turning head and sword alike towards Lio Convoy, who had been observing from across the dilapidated boulevard, “move along or you’re next.”

It was all too much. Part of him had always known that this sort of thing happened with alarming frequency, that the system he had worked so fervently to keep balanced was built on the exploitation and harassment of the little ‘bot. This knowledge he had pushed down deep, until he no longer needed to face the cruel reality, the brutal ugliness of what it meant to be a Maximal in a world designed for Builders.

Lio Convoy found himself standing straighter than before, thrusting out his breast slightly and squaring his shoulders. He no longer felt capable of backing down, as he had so many times in the past. “Then, tool of the Builders, it would appear that I am next.”

The broader MCSF Maximal, who had once again gotten a firm grip on his luckless quarry, gave his soon-to-be prisoner a shove in the shoulder and turned to face Lio Convoy. “Well, well, looks like we’ve got a hero on our hand.” A wicked tri-blade abruptly extended from his right forearm. “Snarl, what kind of charges are we looking at so far?”

The taller gendarme, Snarl apparently, cracked his neck and tilted his head from side-to-side with apparent relish. “So far we’ve got menacing, causing a public disturbance, obstruction of justice, and something tells me we’re about to get resisting arrest. Add that together, Polar Claw, and I think we’re talking eight, maybe 12 orbital cycles in cyber-disconnect and two full years of energon rations.”

“You hear that, hero? We’ll be garnishing your wages for the next thousand Games! And you forgot loitering.”

The fight could be stopped before it started, Lio Convoy knew, if he simply willed his Solipsistic Staff to appear and used it to disable the two agents of oppression. But he craved, no, he physically needed the catharsis of hand-to-hand combat. So instead, he raised his right arm parallel to the ground and gestured twice with his fingers for them to come get him, a smirk unseen behind his faceplate.

Something about his easy confidence rattled the heavier guard, Polar Claw. He tilted his head to one side and radioed in a brief message. “Command, this is MCSF Patrol one seven niner, in Gilbax grid Khajida, requesting backup. We’ve got a four-twelve in progress here.” He locked eyes with his partner and they nodded, no doubt having exchanged some brief wireless communication. Then they began to circle Lio Convoy, Snarl to the left, Polar Claw to the right. Each kept his weapon carefully between them and their target. Unobserved, the horned Maximal scurried away, one of his arms still cuffed and dangling uselessly.

Lio Convoy crossed his arms and waited, apparently unconcerned. Inside, his spark pulsed with trepidation. What was he doing? The MCSF were supposed to be the good guys, keeping order, providing safety. If he surrendered now, surely his connections... but no, these thugs weren’t
here to offer protection. They were extortionists, draining the already destitute community of energon it could ill-afford to lose. However noble their intentions when they joined, it was impossible to imagine they were unaware of who they were and the role they played.

When his two opponents were directly opposite each other, they cautiously advanced. Lio Convoy forced himself to wait patiently. His best chance was to let them make the first move. When they were each just out of his reach, some unseen signal passed between them and they both lashed out, Polar Claw high, Snarl low. Lio Convoy sidestepped expertly and delivered a two-fingered jab to Snarl’s shoulder, causing his arm to go limp and his weapon to clatter to the street. While the tall Maximal took a step back, clutching his useless limb, Lio Convoy dropped to a crouch and gave a spinning kick. Snarl managed to evade, but the blade was knocked out of reach.

Polar Claw stabbed downward with his weapon, prompting Lio Convoy to roll forward and tackle the white robot. They went down in a morass of limbs, mindless sounds of combat escaping from their verbal processors as they wrestled. Lio Convoy was keenly aware that Snarl was still in the fight, and further that backup couldn’t be more than a couple of cycles away. He needed to end this fight fast, and that need gave him strength. He drove a vicious elbow into the torso of his opponent, and Polar Claw’s optics brightened, then dimmed. Unconsciousness took him.

Lio Convoy looked up just in time to see Snarl running at him, blade first. His foot lashed out, knocking the lawbot to the ground with a loud thud. Instantly Lio Convoy was on his feet. A brief glance told him that Snarl wouldn’t be getting up for a cycle or two, more than enough time. He willed himself to shift into his vehicle form and disabled his on-board transponder, a felony. As he sped out of town, he wondered what in the Pit he had just done.

The road back to Nyon was windswept and desolate. Halfway to his destination, the angry vermillion clouds overhead burst and a painful splattering of acid rain sleeted down, pitting his chassis and obscuring his vision. He stubbornly kept driving rather than seek shelter, comforted at least in the knowledge that the noisome weather would keep all others off the road. When he willed his wipers to activate, he found that one was catching on a jagged splinter of glass protruding from his windshield; he must have cracked it during his scuffle with the MCSF.

Why, why had he done that? Surely assaulting two of his fellow Maximals, ‘bots who were only following orders, couldn’t be the best way to effect change. He’d heard the occasional murmurs of resistance, seen the odd flier or graffiti agitating against the status-quo, caught snatches of the underground Radio Free Cybertron broadcast. Was that what he was? An agitator? Was that what he wanted to be?

Entering the arena provided temporary relief from the stinging downpour, if not from his
tumultuous thoughts. Evening had come, and the rains still scoured the landscape. His thoughts turned to the ‘bot who had fallen from the sky. If she were still here, he would find her. To anyone else, it would be an impossible task. Amid the myriad crumbling ruins and tumbling walls and hidden crevices and ramshackle piles, there were simply too many places to hide. But this arena, like all arenas, was his domain.

Staff in hand, he made his way to the broadcast center. It afforded him entry to this sanctuary, normally reserved for Builders alone. The primary nerve center of the arena was permanently staffed by a Builder, a particularly nasty one called Black Omen who delighted in showing close-ups of the faces of Maximals whose sparks were being extinguished. But Black Omen was also apathetic, and Lio Convoy knew he would most likely be immersed in a holoscan dramas of the halcyon days of the Decepticon Star Empire. Primus knows the Builder was in that state often enough when Lio Convoy had requested information from him in the past, and that was during a Game.

Surely enough, the sickly yellow and gray colossus was there, moss-green optics dimmed but flickering as he lived his life in the make-believe world of a past that never quite was. Lio Convoy realized he’d never actually seen this particular Builder face to face before, and couldn’t help but notice the unusual posture. Most sessile Builders were seated or prone, or occasionally standing against a wall. Black Omen was built leaning backwards, arms dangling awkwardly, face staring eternally at the ceiling. As ever, feeding tubes and datapipes and heat-venting ducts tethered this shell to the rest of Cybertron. A tremor ran through Lio Convoy, though he wasn’t sure if it was driven by fear or disgust or even pity.

With an occasional glance towards the cadaverous bulk of malice splayed in the center of the room, Lio Convoy powered up the multitudinous sensors infesting every square mechanometer of the Nyon Coliseum. Optical sensors, heat imagers, motion triggers, acoustic pickups, RADAR, olfactometers, and more gave him a view of the environment so complete that nothing larger than a mecho-gnat could escape his notice. There were hundreds of creatures moving out there, and he began to gradually refine his search parameters. As the false positives of twitchy glitch mice and irritable nosorons and bounding electro-toads dropped away, he focused on the larger creatures. The rains abated as the dawn came, and the menagerie that made Nyon so unique stymied his efforts. Was that... no, that was a pneuma-lion, stalking a herd of wary zappyponies ready to convert to motorcycle modes at the slightest provocation. Over there... no, a machadron of all things, in its secondary configuration as a squat, armored tank. After several megacycles, he was forced to conclude that she was no longer here. With one last backwards glance at the insensate Builder, he left the control center and then the arena.

Thwarted in finding the one being who seemed to offer any answers, he drove into the endless wastelands of Cybertron. The craters of millions of years of warfare, the rust drifts, the fissures leading to Primus only knew where, and the other various navigational hazards large and small
provided an ample distraction from his traitorous thoughts. He reflected on how deadly his homeworld really was, and thought it appropriate that it would birth so many savage species, his own included. When his engine began to overheat, he came to a stop in the shadow of an steepled outcropping.

Exhaustion shrouded him. Hadean was once again blazing in the sky, and he realized belatedly that, transponder or no, he was certainly visible to the many satellites orbiting far above. He didn’t care. Part of him wanted to be found. After allowing his engine to cool for a few moments, he maximized back to his primary configuration and leaned against a wall. With the stranger gone, possibly forever, he wasn’t sure how to proceed. Try to find the resistance? That seemed like an exercise in futility. Crawl back to The Administrator and pretend his eyes hadn’t been opened?

With no clear way forward, he fell back on the comfort of the familiar. Once again he assumed the lotus position and allowed himself to connect to his inner core, his rhythmically pulsing spark. Like all Maximals, an on-board suite of Nanomachines helped balance and maintain vital functions. Unlike most, he was able to consciously direct them. A Builder medic once told him that this was flat-out impossible. Impossible or not, he could do it.

His spark seemed to contract in on itself, and he became aware of the nanite swarm that whorled and eddied throughout his form. Around every miniscule anodic corrosion they coalesced, realigning the molecules that had undergone undesirable chemical reactions. The spiderweb of cracks on his chest, which had so stymied his wipers, were adjusted on a micro- and macroscopic scale, reknit into a single coherent piece. By the evening, he had returned his body to optimal running condition.

When he opened his eyes, she was there. And she was not alone. She was one of a half dozen shadowy forms surrounding him. All had weapons drawn except for her. Their approach had been silent; he had been completely unaware of them. Beneath his faceplate, he felt himself smiling. The warmth he was feeling reached his voice. “It is good to see you, Mysterious Stranger.”

Her body was new, a sleek black and gold form. A large wheel adorned each calf, and at least one more was peeking out from her back, leading him to wonder if she was some sort of ATV now. Some hints of her former acicular self remained, especially about her knees and elbows. He found himself missing her extra limbs. “You’ve really mastered that ‘transform and transcend’ scrap, haven’t you, oh wise and noble guardian of the status quo?”

He drank in the others who had encircled him as best he could in the low light. To her left, a white and gold femme sporting two large wings from her shoulder, a green crystal in the center of her chest, and an enormous energy weapon. A Predacon symbol was emblazoned on her shoulder. To her right was a Maximal with a bulky blue body with white and gold accents. The wheels on his shoulders suggested some sort of ground vehicle, and the steadiness with which he held the two pistols in his hands suggested that this was a combat veteran. He couldn’t get a good look at the three behind him, but their presence was keenly felt.
Broken Windshields

Despite his instinct to leap to his feet, Lio Convoy remained cross-legged. “No need for sarcasm, Mysterious Stranger. I have already done more in the past few days to upset the status quo than I have in my decades of life. And you can call me Lio Convoy. But I am curious, how could you find me in this vast expanse of nothingness?”

She arched a brow. Her face was one of the most expressive he’d ever seen, with no visor or mouthplate to obscure her surprisingly delicate features. Her new eyes were unsettling, an obsidian emptiness set in her aurous face. “OK, there’s a lot to unpack there, little lion man. When I returned to this place,” she gestured vaguely, “I was supposed to materialize on Earth.” His face remained blank, the word had no special resonance for him. Was it his imagination, or did she look just a trifle disappointed? “I figured I’d enlist some allies with REAL firepower. Instead, my transdimensional navigation gets locked onto some sort of energy matrix and I find myself right back on good old Cybertron.”

She paused her speech and began pacing. When it was clear she needed a prompt, he urged her on. “But that still doesn’t--”

She whirled on him. “Would you please stand up? I can’t take you seriously with you folded up like an origami flower!”

He glanced left and right at the Maximal and Predacon with guns leveled at him, but their faces remained neutral. He complied slowly, careful to keep his hands open and nonthreatening. “That’s better. Now, where was I? Oh, right, energy matrix. Something of presumed Terran manufacture, and it drew me straight here. So, after you decide you need to go on a vision quest or whatever, I slip out of the depressing shrine to carnage and mediocrity you left me in and try to find some ‘bots with the spark to effect real change. It took me a few days of slinking around a Predacon ghetto called Burthov, but eventually I met Scylla here hanging around the waste disposal magrails.” She nodded to the white and gold Predacon, who gave a small smirk.

“Arrrgh, we is always on the lookout for fresh oil. Ye be sure ye wishes to be spillin’ yer guts to a Class-A fop like this one here, Blackarachnia? In my experience, Maximals of means and privilege seldom give up the good life to be hangin’ with the likes of us.”

So, that was her name, he mused. Blackarachnia. Fitting. She seemed to notice the attention he was paying her and slinked closer. “Lio Convoy here is a Maximal in search of a cause, if I’m not wrong.” Her fingers once again played across his chest and he felt himself hyper-aware of her. “And besides, a few megacycles ago I felt the same tug in my mind that I felt while transiting to Cybertron. I’ve been drawn to you. To this!” On the last syllable, she raked her fingers across the newly repaired windshield on his chest, shattering it. Beneath it, his spark visibly pulsed. He gasped in shock and took a step backwards,
only to feel several weapons press into his back.

Blackarachnia crossed her arms, a look of triumph on her face. He could see her much more clearly in the unnaturally bright light emanating from his chest, her and her companions. Looks of astonishment adorned their faces. “I never thought I’d be seein’ the likes of that,” muttered Scylla.

The bulky Maximal shook his head slowly, trying to clear it.”Woah, bro, your spark. That ain’t normal, dude!”

Blackarachnia interlaced her fingers and rested her chin upon her fists. “No, B’Boom, it’s not. That’s the energy matrix that drew me to Cybertron. And that’s why you’re the key to setting this whole planet free.”

At the summit of the Cortex, Eject wished he had the energon to pace. Game MCMXXIV was going to start in just under a megacycle, and Lio Convoy was still completely off-the-grid. When word had reached him that there had been an incident with the MCSF, Eject had immediately used some of his vast political capital to see that his protégé’s name was excised from all official reports. He blamed himself, and his own indiscretions, for Lio Convoy’s uncharacteristic outburst. The system was fragged and unfair, and sometimes it rankled to play a part in propping it up, but what was the alternative?

Sure that Lio Convoy would surface, Eject had hidden the incident from the third-rate has-beens who made up the Builder Assembly. Gone were such luminaries as Optimus Prime, Bumblebee, Prowl, his own mentor Blaster. Past was the time of malevolent visionaries like Megatron, Starscream, Shockwave, Soundwave. This age belonged to the hacks, the Ratbats and Kudons, the Rikers and the Traachons, the Cross-Cuts and the Sigils. Doubtless, had the council learned of Lio Convoy’s apparent political awakening, they’d have moved to eliminate him. Now he was starting to wonder if his faith had been misplaced. Perhaps he should have activated his Galva Contingency while he still had time.

Normally, he’d be ecstatic so close to a Game. The roar of the crowds sustained him; the thrill of the battles invigorated him. Only during the matches did he truly feel alive, as he had so many centuries before, when times were better. Despite not having his agent in play to ensure that the Games turned out as he needed them to, he felt a twinge of excitement. Maybe having a lopsided Cull wouldn’t spell the downfall of Cybertronian society and his own position within it. Sure, it’d give the Predacons a little more cachet than they would otherwise have and the Autobots on the Assembly would metaphorically sweat a little. But they could always train a new Guardian of Order. Besides, the prospect of not knowing how a Game would turn out was beginning to get his pistons firing.
A chiming on his desk distracted him from his reverie. Not wanting to spend the energy to press a button he sent a wireless pulse to activate the comm, slightly depressed by this sad calculus of mobility and efficiency. Zoom Out’s wide, ugly face filled the enormous screens that were his wall. “Ze prodigal Maximal is on site and wishes to speak mit you.” Eject idly noticed that the Decepticon, at nearly twice Eject’s size, didn’t even move his lips when he spoke, but instead willed his voice to synthesize from the speakers he was hardwired to. Some beings faced harsher realities than even he.

In a moment, Lio Convoy appeared, and sure enough he was transmitting from the Dodecahex Arena. Eject’s spark skipped a beat with an odd combination of relief and disappointment. “Administrator, I am here to do my duty, if the Builder Assembly will still have me.”

“You’re skating on thin ice, mister! Where in the Pit have you been?”

The errant Maximal gave a slow, serene shake of his head. Eject wasn’t imagining it, there was definitely something different about him. It was mildly infuriating. “Your words resonated deep within me, honored Administrator. I... I made some hasty decisions and engaged in combat with a Maximal Command Security Force patrol.”

“Yeah, well, ace, you can spare me the blow-by-blow, I had a ringside seat to your little bush league antics. I had to run interference for ya with the Builder Assembly. I just wish you’d contacted me sooner, not left me behind the eight ball like this. Don’tcha know I’m in your corner?”

A fleeting look of unfathomable sorrow flashed across the Maximal’s eyes, vanishing so quickly Eject wondered if he was projecting. “I know that you believe it to be so.”

“What’s that supposed--nevermind. Look, we’re down to the wire. This is a standard Game, twelve on twelve. Since we’ll be announcing a Cull as soon as this one concludes, and the Maximals are down 8 guys, make sure their team wins, big. At least five-zilch. Otherwise, let’s take the usual pep-talk as read. Stay outta sight, yadda yadda yadda. And the next time you’re feeling down for the count, talk it over with your old coach here before you see some social injustice and coming out swinging. Now, you ready to play?”

Lio Convoy nodded and seemed about to close the connection, when a last thought occurred to him. “It’s not a game, Administrator. Not for the twenty-four sparks entering the arena, knowing that most of them will never again emerge.” Before Eject could respond, the feed was cut.

Low blow, he thought.

Dodecahex was buzzing with excitement, as arenas always did immediately before a Game. The massive dome over the once-great city was transparent aluminum, reinforced with a latticework of tritanium arches and trestle. The natural light gave Games here a diurnal authenticity.
lacking in many. The inner ring, with nothing between spectator and the haphazard ruins of the city, held seating for over a hundred thousand Builders. Of course, with mobility so rare among them, fewer than a thousand had donned exo-walkers and laboriously transported their dilapidated bodies to the spectacle. A dozen members of the Micro Master patrols mingled among the guests, a plumb assignment.

The outer ring, recessed and higher up, was rated for half a million Maximals and Predacons, with Maximals occupying the northeast portion of the ring and Predacons the southwest. Override, the Builder who administered this arena, estimated the numbers at over forty thousand Predacons and nearly thirty thousand Maximals. Four hundred members of the MCSF were present to ensure order, and some 50 clandestine members of the Predacon Secret Police surreptitiously mingled with the crowds.

Dodecahex itself was once a major shipping and logistics hub, when Cybertron was an influential galactic power. The remains of the massive Farad Spaceport were the most prominent feature, dominating the landscape. Eight massive loading spires thrust skyward from the corpse of the facility like the ribcage of some mammoth beast, four by four and curved inward. A wide, swift river ran through the ruins of the city, flowing towards the Great Rust Sea. The crumbling remnants of industrial docks littered its shores, and at least one massive seagoing vessel festered on the riverbed. After one enterprising but heavily outnumbered contestant attempted to use it to flee, Override had seeded it with alloygators and oxide sharks. Most subsequent Games featured at least one Maximal and Predacon with an aquatic alternate mode, and several natatory gladiators met their ends when a shiver of the deracinated sharks dispatched a member in torpedo mode to immolate the intruder to their abyssal realm. The rest of the landscape was a palimpsest of debris, the disintegrating ruins of a metropolis worn down by time and an endless series of brutal contests, much like all the other arenas.

The crowd was alive, fully alive, in the way that only the Games provided these dark days. The Builders felt the opportunity to settle half-forgotten scores. Predacons could slake their bloodlust, if only vicariously. Maximals momentarily forgot the oppressive boot of the MCSF and their Builder masters stamped down on their necks. As the nano-kliks ticked down, their tension ratcheted up. The appointed time was only cycles away. Fisticuffs broke out in the Predacon section, with MCSF descending from all directions to ensure that it didn’t escalate into a brawl.

Finally, when the crowd seemed ready to throng onto the field, a rare, fully-mobile Builder flew to the center of the arena in jet mode and transformed into his humanoid form. All over the planet, holoscans and monitors tuned to his image, a dashing figure immaculate in white and pink. In the walls of the arena, his voice amplified a thousand times over rattled the walls. Supersonic had arrived.

Imagers focused on his face, his expressions manic with delight as he serenaded the crowd. “Ladies and gentlebots, Maximal and Predacon and Builder, are you ready for... the Game?”
An inevitable roar answered him as Maximal and Predacon were pulled to their feet by his charisma. The Builders, in their mobility contraptions, couldn’t stand, but they too shouted their readiness. “I didn’t quite hear you. Are you ready for gladitorial combat?” He savored the last two words, drawing out the vowels for several nano-kliks.

This time, the response was deafening, with cameras sweeping the crowds and sending the image all over Cybertron. The enthusiasm was contagious; in Maximal bars and Predacon dives and Builder casinos all over the world, voices were raised unselfconsciously in approval.

Supersonic continued to hover, an enormous energy expenditure fully justified by the impact he was having on the world. “The one thousandth, nine hundredth, twenty fourth Games are about to begin! Let’s meet our contestants!”

Gigantic monitors embedded in the rings switched over from the close-ups of the flamboyant Micro Master and began flashing through the contestants one by one. “Our Maximal team is most formidable this Game! Drawn from all over the planet, we’ll start with Binary!” The screen flashed to an unusual green and blue femme with four arms. “She’s traveled extensively off-world, and was selected to represent Uraya! Let’s give it up for her!” The Maximal contingent cheered loudly, while the Predacon contingent spewed cat-calls and invectives her way.

Each Maximal was given the chance to introduce themselves. Sonar shrugged the metallic coils mimicking hair from her eyes and gave a brief “whatever.” Manta looked directly into the camera, growled, and told the audience to go scrap themselves. Crystal Widow blew the audience a kiss. Air Hammer puffed out his chest and told the “citizens” that he was on the case. Skywarp waved to the crowd, smiling shyly. CatSCAN had his hands folded serenely and observed that, as the universe desired, so shall it be done. Dinotron just growled through impossibly jagged teeth. Panther gave an enthusiastic “ultra-gear!” Tasmania Kid cocked his weapon and pointed it at the camera and mimed firing it. Rhino gave a broad grin and observed in a deep voice that “it looks like we’re doing this thing.” The designated team leader, Optimus Minor, was introduced to the crowd last. By this point, the applause from the Maximals and the heckling from the Predacons was thunderous, and his attempt at an inspirational speech was largely lost.

When the spotlight returned to him, Supersonic seemed to drink in the adulation. “Quite an impressive team, are they not? And now let’s meet our Predacon contingent!” The roles reversed, Maximals hurling vitriol towards the twelve gladiators while Predacons howled their
boisterous approval. One by one, the crowd met Insecticon, Megalligator, Scourge, Night Viper, Transquito, Autostinger, Scavenger, Creepy, Reptix, Terragator, Queen Rage, and their leader, Rot Gut.

“Those videos were all filmed earlier this day. Each contestant has been taken to an entry point throughout the arena, and will be released one by one into the city! This is a simple elimination match, no rules, no strictures. When all of one side has fallen, the contest is over. Now. Shall We. Begin?”

The crowd was again pulled to its collective feet, and the roar they made nearly knocked Supersonic out of the air. He threw back his head, tossed his arms skyward as if imploring the heavens, and shouted, “begin!”

Lio Convoy watched Supersonic’s prattling carefully. He wanted to time his interruption perfectly. Matches typically went on for days, and attention inevitably waned. Many would be content to catch the daily highlights, but nearly everyone would tune in to the opening of the Game as most started with at least one Maximal and Predacon dumped into the arena right on top of each other. Even ‘bots uninterested in the pre-Game spiel would try to catch that first match.

From his vantage point atop one of the desquamating Farad ribs, Lio Convoy spied the first being released into the Game, the Predacon Terragator, a bulky turquoise ‘bot laden with weapons. He emerged in the southeast, giving Maximal and Predacon alike a good look at him. Baffle fields muted the crowds somewhat, enough that no individual voice could give too much information, but not so much that a contestant could forget where he was and what he was doing.

Lio Convoy’s optics focused. If his guess was accurate... indeed, there it was. Sonar had been released a stone-throw from the Predacon. Normally he liked to let the initial matches play out, get a feel for the combatants. In a Game of twelve on twelve, the initial contest seldom mattered. Given the missive to make it a decisive Maximal victory, he might try to reflect sunlight into the optic of the Predacon at a key moment or otherwise cause a subtle distraction, but he wasn’t following the script this time.

Sonar converted to her helicopter configuration and took to the air immediately. Rookie mistake, he thought. Surely enough, Terragator spotted her before she could catch her bearings and released a barrage of missiles from his shoulder-mounted launcher. She was forced to execute an increasingly desperate series of jags and jinks in a futile attempt evade. In terms of captivating an audience, he couldn’t have asked for better.

A stream of drivel continued to issue from Supersonic, who was nearly close enough to be a part of the action but, of course, strictly off-limits. With a grim set to his eyes, Lio Convoy set
out to change that. He summoned his new weapon from subspace, an Angolmois Blaster that Blackarachnia’s pet technician Break had designed. With great deliberation, he released the Staff and became theoretically visible to the monitors, though all focus was naturally on the battle raging below. He swallowed nervously, took aim at the Builder, and fired.

The cocksure Builder was struck mid-jabber. His glib mouth lost its smirk and took on a look of facile confusion, even as the light in his eyes died. It took the camera operators a few nanokliks to realize what had happened, but when they did, suddenly all optics on Cybertron were watching the assassination of a Builder by an unknown Maximal. “Now,” he muttered into his comm.

“Now,” whispered Lio Convoy in Blackarachnia’s ear.

She smirked. He was so obvious. “When else?” She and her team of resistance fighters had crept through the compound, eliminating the occasional patrol that they couldn’t elude. They were poised outside the broadcast center, where the Builder Override was running the transmission. There would be MCSF, no doubt. Her squad was ready. She pointed at the door and nodded. B’Boom smashed a fist into his open palm. “Gotcha, bro!”

Break, who had already removed the door’s control panel, crossed a wire and the heavy portal irised open. “#we’rein #let’stothisthing”

B’Boom wasted no time diving into the entrance, guns blazing from each hand. Two Maximal guards were felled instantly. Scylla followed him in, darting left and taking cover as the two remaining security ‘bots returned fire. B’Boom was undaunted and didn’t even duck. “Oh, it’s like that, is it? Come at me! Come at me, bros!”

Blackarachnia motioned for Break to wait where he was, and he responded with a quick “#don’thavetotellmetwice #I’malovernotafighter #you’retheboss.” Before he could even finish his odd reply, she leapt into the room herself, aiming straight for the Builder wired into the arena. She noted that the speed and severity of the attack had momentarily paralyzed the ancient Autobot; the monitor was still trained on the wreckage of Supersonic on the floor of the arena, with secondary cameras trained on the increasingly irrelevant battle between Sonar and Terrorgator. Good, she thought. She began slashing wires with near-surgical precision, wanting to remove from the Builder any semblance of control over the broadcast.

Override snapped back into the here and now, her blue optics narrowing. Blackarachnia could almost see the impulse leave her antiquated cranium into the tangled skein of cables connecting her to the arena’s superstructure, and then autoguns began to deploy from the walls and ceiling. She had to end this fast or it would turn into a slaughter. No time to do this the nice way. In her hands appeared two energy pistols, and she lodged one right in the Builder’s left eye socket.
“Call ‘em off, beanpole.” Override gave her a look of pure hatred, but complied.

She began mentally counting down the nano-kliks until reinforcements arrived even as she finished severing the Builder’s variegated connections. It wouldn’t be long. She had left Retrax and Longhorn to hold the corridor, but they couldn’t hold out forever. A quick survey confirmed that B’Boom and Scylla had secured the rest of the MCSF guards. She wasn’t sure if they were still pulsing, and at this moment didn’t really care. “Break, get your skidplate in here. I want you running cameras five cycles ago.”

Override worked her jaw uncertainly. Evidently she was one of the Builders who relied on external technology even to speak. “Why... why are you doing... this, Maximal? I am an... Autobot, your ancestor.”

Blackarachnia shook her head, her tone sardonic. “Sorry, grandma, this message is too important to risk some Builder jamming it.”

The Builder’s head shook fractionally left to right. “The... the Games... they are all... that keep... us stable...”

Break gave the thumb’s up. “#totalownage.”

With a last glance at the Autobot, Blackarachnia muttered, “yeah, well, stability ain’t all it’s cracked up to be. Break, zoom tight in on Lio Convoy.” She re-opened her comm link. “It’s all on you, big guy.”

This is it, he thought, as the resistance-directed feed began to display images of him standing there, on the enormous curved pylon, blaster smoking. The crowd was still gasping. He swallowed, and then found his words.

“People of Cybertron. I come before you to speak of a great injustice. The animosity between Maximal and Predacon is a farce!” The thronging multitudes had spotted him, and already he could see the MCSF with flying modes begin to take the field. He had prepared for this; he nudged his Staff with his foot and activated the paralysis field, set to the widest pattern it could sustain. Every Maximal and Predacon in the crowd was suddenly unable to move; the airborne MCSF crashed to the ground.

“The Builders were given a great gift, the ability to create a new generation of Cybertronians. It was to have ushered in a new era of peace; instead, this gift was twisted, perverted into this sad farce you see.” He gestured to Sonar and Terrorgator, paralyzed with their hands around each others’ throats. His monitoring of the feed showed that the cameras were responding. That was good and bad. It meant that his allies could still move, but so could any MCSF or Predacon secret police menacing them, shielded within the depth of the arena. Nano-kliks mattered.
“Instead of being allowed to develop on our own, we were subjugated by the Builders, instilled with ancient enmities better abandoned and forced to battle for our own lives in rigged games.” A blast from one of the few mobile Builder patrols impacted the vertiginous spire he was standing on, and he nearly lost his balance. Sure enough, two of them had been mode-locked into rusted but flight-capable fighter planes, no doubt the forms they had once preferred when they had the choice of transformation, and were now setting up a strafing run.

“Yes, rigged! I know this because I myself have stalked through nearly every Game for decades, subtly altering the outcomes to keep every contest, every series of contests, on the razor’s edge.” He had to leap from the spire at that point to avoid a deadly spray of metal from a blue Builder jet with a tan and green Builder wingman, catching an outcropping and landing adroitly on the floor of the metal jungle.

The lead jet taunted him, and the pervasive sensors allowed his resistance members to capture it all. Whatever else happened, this was good drama. Every optic on Cybertron was sure to be watching. “You hear that, Sunrunner? He claims he’s been fixing Games all along. If I believed him, I’d make him pay me a few hundred energon rations!”

Sunrunner chuckled as he came in for a dive. “Good one, Tailwind. Buncha resistance propaganda garbage.” He let fly a bomb, which Lio Convoy had to scramble to evade.

When the camera returned to show him, battered but unharmed, he made a point of standing defiantly. “Not garbage. I recorded this conversation just a few cycles before this Game began.” He activated a holoscan of The Administrator, and his own words damned him.

Eject’s ancient, familiar visage appeared on every monitor, in every oil joint, in every office, and in every domicile on the planet. “Since we’ll be announcing a Cull as soon as this one concludes, and the Maximals are down 8 guys, make sure their team wins, big. At least five-zilch. Otherwise, let’s take the usual pep-talk as read. Stay outta sight, yadda yadda yadda.” Lio Convoy knew that the time for paralysis was over. He willed the Staff to his hand, switched off the dampening field, and dismissed it back to the ether.

The mobs in the stadium took a few nano-kliks to pick themselves up and regain their bearings. They had heard everything, but been unable to react. Lio Convoy realized he probably had less than a cycle at this point. He opened his chest and exposed the energon matrix entwined with his spark, its eerie glow suffusing the desultory environs. “I know what I say is true, because I am living
proof. When the Builders decided there were enough of us, enough Maximals and Predacons to carry on their twisted legacy of rancor and hatred, they needed to hide away the source of this new life. They hid it in me, gave me a life of privilege and affluence, made me the Guardian of Order. But I renounce this sad heritage. Maximals and Predacons are not, should not, must not be enemies! Instead, rise up against the Builders, the relics of the past unable to let go of their antipathy. Only then—” He was blown from his feet by another air strike. He lay painfully prone, the camera zoomed tight on his face. “Only when the Uprising is complete will we be truly free.” He summoned the Staff and disappeared.

The days that followed that fateful broadcast were an imbroglio of conflict. Nearly a third of Maximal and Predacon hunkered down, wanting no part in the chaos filling every street on the planet. Some took the opportunity to settle old scores, or set themselves up as petty tyrants over some city. A tenth of Predacons and nearly a quarter of Maximals declared as loyalists for the Builders. The rest began the Grand Uprising, the Fourth Cybertronian War. Cities were stormed, fortresses rushed. Malignant Builders were torn from the architecture of penurious Maximal and Predacon tumbledowns. Freedom fighters and revolutionaries once again saw daylight as prisons and dungeons were besieged and liberated, though so too were murderers and thieves return to the population. Fear permeated the planet, but amongst the Maximals and Predacons, an inchoate hope also blossomed.

Civil war had once again erupted on this star-crossed world.
Far under the Builder stronghold of Iacon, the Builder Assembly deliberated the sad case before them. Eject, Administrator of the Games, knelt before them, glowing energon-chains biting into his wrists and ankles. Councilor Octus took the lead, his face a study in fury. “YOU protected him! YOU watched over him! YOU are to blame for the sad state of affairs that will rip this planet asunder! We’ve already lost three cities and are barely holding on to the rest of our territory! Maximals and Predacons outnumber our Micro Master Patrols a hundred to one! Do you know we’ve intercepted chatter about naming him their ‘Supreme Commander?’”

“No, now, Councilor,” admonished Ratbat, tone dripping with false solicitousness. “I’m sure Eject had a reason he appealed his sentence all the way to this august body. After all,” and his eyes gleamed, “there are worse fates than a simple spark extraction.” He turned to Eject, former cassette to former cassette and one of only two fully mobile member of the Assembly. “So, why don’t you convince me you’re not wasting our time.”

His optics flickered as Eject blinked away his nervousness, once again finding his voice. “OK, yeah, I admit it. I dropped the ball with Lio Convoy here. But there’s something you’re forgetting.”

Ratbat leaned in close, a mask of opprobrium not quite hiding his curiosity. “Oh? What is that, exactly?”

Did he really want to do this, give the ossified council this weapon? Perhaps there was a time he’d have the strength to take his punishment and let events run their course. That time was long ago. “The matrix they gave us... it’s fused with him, right down to his CNA. And I’ve got a sample, hidden away; it’s my own little Hail Mary contingency plan. So, you grow another one of him, and you get your own energon matrix. We could make a whole new army.”

The council murmured to each other, then nodded to Ratbat. “Very well, Eject. I believe the ball is in your court.”