

Every day, at midnight, when the stars best held their shape and the world below was steady on the turn, he polished Springer's eyes.

He didn't need to: not really. The air in the medibay was triple-filtered and cryo-controlled, and therefore entirely free from dust, pollutants, particulate matter, and any of the Decepticons' airborne micro-assassins (although he wasn't sure if he'd made the Nanocons up; loneliness could play hideous tricks on the mind) — but that wasn't really the point.

No, Roadbuster polished Springer's eyes because he cared.

Soon after volunteering to keep watch on his comatose leader, Roadbuster had realised that the key to staving off the excruciating boredom was routine. And so, in the morning, he would check that Debris — the all-but deserted containment facility, high in orbit above Hydrus 5, that had once been the Wreckers' base of operations — was safe and secure. He would test the locks, walk the corridors, throw some torchlight around and talk to the coffins in the of Zone of Remembrance ("Hello Top Spin, hello Twin Twist. Morning, Rotorstorm. How you doing, Ironfist? Just saying hi, Pyro"). And in the afternoon he would switch on his datapad and read as best he could, congratulating himself if he finished a sentence without moving his faceplate. And in the evening — his favorite part of the 120-hour day — he would invent new weaponry, cannibalizing his extensive personal arsenal to produce ever larger and more fearsomely elaborate creations. And finally, when it was nearly midnight, he would put down or unplug or climb out of his latest weapon, reach for a spray-duster, lean over Springer's resolutely expressionless face — a collision of right angles and hard shadow — and set to work sluicing out the Triple Changer's optical gutters, sterilizing his retinal filaments, and cleansing his dilated photoreceptors.

Springer didn't move, of course. He hadn't moved of his own accord for nearly nine months. A fixed point in space, he lay on the circuit slab and braved the weight of the exterior world, blind to the interplay of ambient forces, oblivious to the silent realignment of shape and mass and pressure.

Roadbuster knew very little about other cultures, but he'd heard that many organic races believed that the eyes were the windows to the soul. In a Cybertronian's case, that was, in fact, true: thanks to a complex network of internal apertures and diaphragms, your optics were illuminated by your Spark. The brighter your eyes, the healthier your Spark. And of course the converse was true, which was why Roadbuster rarely looked at Springer while cleaning his eyes: it was too depressing. Before the incident on Garrus 9 — before Overlord had forced five fingers into his frowning face — Springer's optics had been an arresting, thousand-watt blue; and not just any blue, either, but Matrix blue — something which apparently suggested he was Compatible. Now all that light was gone, hurriedly recalled home to the Spark itself in an effort to bolster the dim, diminishing core. Now, no matter how often Roadbuster polished them, Springer's eyes were variously the color of low cloud or smoked glass or rain-soaked concrete.

All of which meant that despite the best efforts of the nearby life-support machines (and there were dozens of them, and they were huge, and the energy they consumed in a day would have illuminated the dark side of Luna 2), Springer was very nearly dead. Roadbuster knew very little about persistent vegetative states, but he was sure of one thing: if Springer

had any life left, if his coffin-shaped body harbored even the slightest animating force, then it was confined to the circuits of his brain.

Forget last words; Springer was now onto his last thoughts.

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Springer lay there, not knowing where 'there' was, not knowing if he was alive, or dead, or poised between the two, reaching in both directions for balance.

His mind fled to the past, to a long, long time ago, when The War had yet to acquire capital letters. Back then, when both sides maintained that civilian casualties would never break the one million mark, and when people still said things like. "This'll all blow over in a century or two." Springer had seen the world in binary terms. Right or wrong. good or bad, black or white; everything lent itself to explicit categorization. The Autobot Code was nothing less than a set of instructions for life, and it was up to Autobots like him — broad-chested and stout of spirit — to uphold the Code in word and deed.

And for many years that was how he'd shouldered his way through life, satisfied that he was fundamentally a decent 'bot, strong and surefooted, forever confident in his ability to negotiate a clearly-mapped moral terrain. There were Evil Decepticons and there were Heroic Autobots, and the two factions were reassuringly distinct. And he used to think: 'Good. I can define myself by what I am not: and I am not, and never will be, a Decepticon.'

But after years on the front line, pushing forward, pulling back, gaining and conceding ground, he concluded that being a decent 'bot wasn't enough. Being a decent 'bot held him back, slowed him down, boxed him in. He wanted to do more. He wanted to leave his mark. He wanted to become a Wrecker.

Not much was known about the Wreckers in those days. They didn't even have a name. They were referred to euphemistically, or in the abstract, their existence confirmed by the occasional sideways glance between those in the know. There was no Fisitron dutifully chronicling their exploits, just rumors spread by word of mouth: a friend of a friend would overhear a conversation between two Autobot high-ups; or a cadet trying to fix a shortwave radio would accidentally intercept details of a secret mission; or a Decepticon would be seen staggering through the streets in a suicidal haze, fretful and undone, babbling hysterically about harpoons before hooking his mouth over the barrel of his gun and finishing what Impactor and Co. had started.

He remembered the first time he'd seen Impactor. He'd been standing at the bottom of Sherma Bridge, trying to guess how tall it was before testing out his newly-upgraded thigh hydraulics, when a flaming Decepticon shuttle pod had dropped out of a transmat portal and bounced between the arches. Riding the pod was a yellow and purple robot with a retractable drill for a hand; a robot who punched his way inside the cockpit, jettisoned the headless Decepticon pilot and set the pod down safely at the foot of Zeta Prime's memorial statue.

Impactor and the Wreckers.

The third faction.

The dividing line between Autobot and Decepticon.

He knew he should've stayed away, but he couldn't help it. As far as he was concerned, Impactor's gang of bullet-battered, flame-scorched, energon-drenched malcontents mattered. They crashed into your life with the force of a rampaging Phase Sixer and they made a difference. They taught the Decepticons the error of their ways: and if in so doing they had to use a certain degree of force — if they had to press the point — well, it was for everyone's own good. No apologies.

A few months after the Sherma Bridge incident he'd asked Kup to add his name to the list of Wreckers reservists — a request which, even then, was seen as an admission not simply that you were willing to die for the Autobot Cause, but that you were actively seeking to bring about, ahead of time, your own fantastically violent demise.

For a long time he'd heard no more about it, that being the way it worked: you didn't even know whether you were under consideration until Impactor himself turned up on your doorstep — or battlefield, in Springer's case. He remembered their first meeting as clearly as the day he was Autobranded: he'd been with the Heliobots, tracking a distress signal through the Toxic Sludge Swamps — deep into Slicer territory — when Impactor had dropped out of the sky, taken out the eight blade-wielding Decepticons that had been hiding in the mist, held out a mighty hand, and said:

"You must be Springer. You know why I'm here. It's time."

And then, with a single handshake from a single hand, his pre-Wreckers life — his black and white life — was over.

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"His life isn't over," Kaput had said to Roadbuster on the day he'd delivered Springer to Debris. "But from a medical perspective — physiologically speaking — his death has begun."

Roadbuster helped the diminutive Kaput carry Springer to the circuit slab and watched him plug crayon-colored energon feeds into a lattice of power points that had been drilled into his body to maximise incoming energy flow.

Kup was there too, chewing on his cygar, circling the slab, treading a trench into the floor and saying nothing.

"You managed to save his face, then." Roadbuster said, touching Springer's chin and looking for telltale signs of reattachment.

Kaput nodded, and turned circles on the wheel that carried him everywhere. "Thanks to Impactor, yes. He was holding it when we got to G9. Strong grip he has, too."

"Well, you've put it back on perfectly. He looks as good as new."

"He's better than new. Fixit and I repaired everything, inside and out. Full body renovation. You know how he used to hum? When he got up too quickly, or stopped running? That humming noise?"

Roadbuster looked up, suddenly aware of Kup's grief, and then turned his attention back to Springer.

"He used to get embarrassed by that, but — yeah. Something to do with his legs, right? Overactive rotors."

"Well, we even fixed them. C'mere." Kaput pulled Roadbuster close to the body. "See? Silent running."

Roadbuster straightened up. "Come on, then. Say it. I've heard it second-hand, but I want to hear it from you. What's wrong with him? Why can't he wake up?"

Kaput preoccupied himself by reconnecting a loose energon feed. "Prowl sends his condolences," he mumbled.

"Oh, does he now? And what did he say, exactly? What were his exact words?"

Silence.

Kaput removed an imaginary speck of dirt from Springer's chest and kept his eyes on the patient when he said: "He can't wake up because we can't find the zero point."

There was a crash as Kup kicked a chair across the room.

Roadbuster stared at Kaput. "I'm sure you did your best." he said at last, adding mentally. 'Because if I find out that you didn't — if I find out that you gave up a fraction of a second earlier than was absolutely necessary — I will strap myself into the Eviscerator and demolish you.'

That was then.

That was before he'd spent six months watching someone he'd come to admire die a little more each day. Now, Roadbuster wished he had grabbed Kaput by the shoulders, stared into his one good eye, and spoken his mind.

Organic races typically took too reductionist a view of Cybertronian physiology. Just because the Autobots and Decepticons were mechanical, just because they could be taken apart and reassembled, the uninitiated assumed that there was no scope in the realm of technomedical science for mystery. But there was a reason why the likes of Ratchet and Fixit and Pharma and Kaput called themselves doctors and surgeons rather than mechanics and engineers, and that reason could be found buried in the chest of every Cybertronian. The Spark — regarded by the Higher Races as a bona fide miracle phenomena —transformed a

mechanical body from a rough rectangle of moving parts into something more. Something far less predictable. Sentience, it seemed, complicated everything.

The zero point was the name given to an infinitesimally small cavity between two nervecircuits — a cavity that prevented a Spark from completing its vital journey around the body. Roadbuster knew very little about technomedical science, but he knew that certain injuries could open up a fatal gap inside the chest or brain — a tiny sinus of warm space between two all-important energy conductors that was invisible to even the most sophisticated sensors. The micro-vacuum would force the Spark to veer off course and, ultimately, rob the body of life.

Occasionally you'd hear of a freak recovery — Ultra Magnus sprang to mind — and the experts would say that a medic or a mourner had accidentally pressed an invisible pressure point and the resultant jolt had somehow closed the gap. He picked up a datapad. The Complete Works of Fisitron contained all 332 of the Wreckers: Declassified datalogs, and more besides. The deluxe data-pack had been released to coincide with the unveiling of Ironfist's statue at Kimia, and was padded out with extras including a 'heartfelt' foreword, written by Prowl, that had all the warmth and sensitivity of a subpoena.

Roadbuster had never subscribed to Fisitron's datalogs: just as some people hated the sound of their own voice, he hated the sound of his own character. Was he really that one-dimensional, that relentlessly gung-ho? As depicted by Fisitron, his every utterance related to the fact that he was in need of, or had just acquired, or was marveling at the damage caused by a weapon.

He scrolled down the page with his trigger-finger, trying to find where he'd left off the night before.

Picking up a datapad and reading to Springer had, in the beginning, presented Roadbuster with a number of challenges; he'd had to learn to read, for starters. Like being able to look at Bumblebee without wanting to pat him on the head, or hold a conversation with Optimus Prime without trying to catch a glimpse of the Matrix through the windows of his chest plate, the ability to read had been one of those things — one of those handy little life skills — that he'd only recently acquired.

It was Kup's fault, the reading thing — Kup having been the one who, soon after Springer was moved to Debris, had asked one of his oldest friends, Rung, to give a psychological account for Springer's condition.

"It's not an interruption of the body," Rung had concluded, referring to the suspected presence of the zero point. "It's an interruption of the mind. No one really understands the properties of a Spark, but I think it's psychosensitive. I think it responds to certain triggers..." Roadbuster had at that point stopped staring at Rung's oversized eyebrows and taken an active interest in the conversation. "Triggers?"

"Emotional triggers, yes. If you could elicit a powerful enough emotional response — love, hate, anger, pride —it might encourage Springer, subconsciously of course, to will his Spark across the synaptic cavity. You just need to connect with him in some way."

"Connect with him?"

"Talk to him."

"Talk to him? What about?"

"I don't know — reminisce about the good old days. All those people you've killed together."

"The thing is, Rung, I kind of struggle with, urn... with..."

"With conversation?"

"...yeah."

Rung had pulled a datapad out of his chest compartment and handed it to Roadbuster. "The Complete Works. 332 War Stories. Give him a couple of these every night and see what happens."

Roadbuster had now read all but one datalog. Actually, he'd read each of the remaining 331 datalogs twice (the second time round he'd attacked the difficult words from which he'd originally retreated).

"Okay. Springer." he muttered as he found chapter seven of 'The Wreckers' Air Attack.' "Where were we? Oh yeah, the aerial drilling platform. Wow. That was a hell of an afternoon. Now, let's see... Megatron's just crushed Impactor's arm and is about to shoot him in the head... 'never did want to live forever'...' reap the whirlwind'...'all the dirty jobs'...'power beyond measure'... ah yes. here we are..."

A dazed Impactor tried to pull himself off the floor of the drilling platform as it tilted towards the Manganese Mountains far below. As he lifted up his head he realized that he'd left something behind, something very important: his mouth. As his chin slid out of reach he felt something touch the back of his head: the barrel of Megatron's second generation micro-calibrated antimatter-catalyzed full-spectrum Mk II fusion cannon.

Megatron stared down at him, a look of pure evil in his eyes. "It's over, Impactor," the leader of the Decepticons smiled mavel — mavelo — malevo—

Roadbuster pulled the datapad closer to his face. "Malevolently?" He showed the datapad to Springer. "Is that what that says? Hmm. Anyway..."

"It's over, Impactor," the leader of the Decepticons smiled mavelolently. "Consider the world one last time, and know that sweet death beckons. Evade not its tender embrace but run, open-armed, into its smothering folds. When the darkness plays at the edge of your consciousness, cherish it."

Impactor channelled the last of his strength into his mangled right arm. He couldn't lift his harpoon from the floor, but he didn't need to. He scraped the blade across the metal, carving out one letter, then another, until he'd written three small words:

'NOT MORE POETRY'

Megatron paused. Perhaps he was caught off guard by the random nature of Impactor's final words; perhaps his fusion cannon had seized up (a common fault with the Mk II); perhaps he thought there was more of the message to come. Whatever the reason he hesitated — just for a second.

A second was all Springer needed.

Impactor's trusty second-in-command rammed his sky sled into the small of Megatron's back and kept going, carrying the Decepticon off the edge of the platform. In a blur, Springer back flipped off the sled, switched to helicopter mode, and watched Megatron fall thousands of feet towards the Manganese Mountains below.

"Nice going, kid." said Impactor, reattaching his vocal synthesizer. "Now, by my reckoning we've got four minutes to save Xaaron, rescue Sandstorm from his antimatter duplicate, deactivate Bludgeon's necrocannon, and —what's the last thing..? — oh yeah, stop this platform from crashing into that nucleon reactor and triggering a chain reaction that will destroy half of Cybertron."

Springer landed beside him in robot mode. "You expect us to do all that in four minutes?" "Two minutes. actually. I lied to make you feel better. But don't worry. I have a plan." He pulled something from his waist compartment. "When I give the signal. I want you to take this authentically detailed scale model of Omega Supreme and very, very carefully—

Roadbuster stopped, shook his head, and checked how much there was left to read. This was chapter seven. Chapter seven of 40. He wondered if he could make it to the end; there was only so many times he could read about Impactor saying something "grimly," or Springer "leaping to the rescue," or Whirl "stepping out of line." And he really couldn't face Datalog 98, with its extended dream sequence, a third time.

This reading business would be far less of a chore, he decided, if his efforts were bearing fruit; if something he'd said had made Springer... well, he wasn't expecting him to sit bolt upright, punch the air and shout "Wreck 'n Rule!", but a twitch would have been nice. Something small but significant: a finger finding a thumb, or a mouth widening at the hinge. Something.

Rung had spoken of a window of opportunity — a chance to pull Springer back from the brink — but the window was surely close to closing. In that sense, for all their size (and they were so big they had their own stairwells, their own antechambers, and mezzanines), the nearby life-support machines were little more than chronometers. Actually, no, not even that; they were metronomes, marking out the slow deceleration of a long life long lived at speed.

Tick.

Tock.

His fingers danced over the datapad and he jumped to Datalog 113. 'Showdown on Pova.' The only datalog he'd not read out loud. The other 331 were full of embellishments and fabrications, but at least they were true to the essence of the adventures they purported to describe.

Tick.

Pova was different.

Tock.

Pova was an outright lie.

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He hadn't known it at the time, but he'd joined the 17th incarnation of the Wreckers. None of the original line-up were still alive at this point (apart from Valve, who for obvious reasons didn't count). Impactor was by now the longest-serving member; and once Springer had recovered from the infamous initiation ceremony (subsequently banned under the Misuse of Weapons Act), the sardonic war hero had taken the eager idealist under his wing. If Kup had been Springer's mentor — worldly, avuncular, paternalistic — then Impactor was like his older Spark brother: cynical, streetwise, inspirational.

As the war got dirtier, so did the Wreckers. Springer had instantly detected a 'shoot first, ask questions later' mentality within the outfit, but as the eight of them became increasingly detached, physically and emotionally, from the Autobot army, 'later' was replaced with 'never.'

"We're the nuclear option," Impactor would say, usually in response to Springer suffering a crisis of conscience. "We put the 'Autobot' in 'A-bomb.' We get dropped on the enemy when conventional weapons have no effect."

Looking back, he was only now starting to realize that he'd deliberately ignored the warning signs: a prisoner not being read his rights; inhibitor claws being applied with such force that they punctured the morphcore; deliberate misinterpretations of 'ambiguous' elements of the Tyrest Accord. At the time he'd found it easier than expected to turn a blind eye, but then most things could be legitimized and waved away for the sake of an untroubled conscience.

Then, inevitably, things got worse: the occasional kick to a prisoner's head; shots designed to maim rather than simply incapacitate; confessions extracted by force. Time and again he'd told himself that as long as he wasn't directly involved in meting out the punishments, as long as he didn't aim the punch or squeeze the trigger, he wasn't culpable. He'd salve his conscience by intervening when things really got out of hand: for every Decepticon whom the other Wreckers despatched with terminal prejudice, there were five more who — thanks to him — were merely paralyzed from the neck down, or buried alive in the bottom of a molten

ocean, or reduced to a disembodied Spark throwing weak shadows against the walls of a half-dug grave. And even as the ratios slipped — even as 'one dead, five saved' became 'five dead, one saved' he told himself that this was to be expected, given that the war was moving to new extremes by the day.

The Wreckers were virtually a law unto themselves by the time Squadron X raged into view. Megatron's gang of grinning deviants would have roused the righteous passion of any Heroic Autobot, but in Impactor they stirred a truly implacable hatred. His leader looked at Macabre and Co. and recognized something of the Wreckers in them; an echo. A distorted, exaggerated echo. To be sure, but an echo nonetheless.

Stopping Squadron X became Impactor's overriding goal. To hell with the Black Epoch: to hell with Simanzi and the Crucible and the Rise of the Dethroner: Impactor made sure that not even the most apocalyptic threat would distract the Wreckers from following their one true path and he, Springer, had gone along with it. Was it any wonder that the path in question led to madness and ruin and death? Was it any wonder that it led to Pova, a crumbling grey-green planet in the Redan Quadrant?

Years of singleminded pursuit had ended not with fisticuffs and quips and a scowling Macabre being led away in handcuffs, but with a rain-filled trench and a blast in the back: with a bolt lock and a borrowed gun; with eight bullets lodged in eight heads.

The journey back from Pova was the longest he'd ever endured. No one spoke. Not a word. As soon as the Xantium landed at G'th Semane spaceport he'd slipped away from the others, bought a communicube, and made the hardest call of his life. Moments later, he'd found himself speaking to a member of High Command who had been waiting hundreds of years for the opportunity to sanction the dawn arrest that followed.

The first thing he'd done after watching a strangely passive Impactor detach his harpoon in front of two dozen Guardian droids was resign from the Wreckers. And it had come as something of a shock when, a few weeks before the trial on Garrus 9 was due to begin, he'd been approached by Roadbuster and asked to take Impactor's place as leader of the Wreckers. Surprised but secretly flattered, he'd asked for time to think about it. Over the next few days he'd received visits from Whirl, then Broadside, and then an ailing Rack 'n Ruin. Each of them had thought themselves his only visitor, and each of them had said the same thing: that they were scared that Prowl would use the events on Pova to shut them down. But more than that, all of them, in their own way, in their own words, had confessed to him that they hated themselves for not realizing what Impactor had intended to do upon reaching the warehouse.

"I thought he'd taken my gun in self-defense." a shattered Roadbuster had said to him. "I thought he was worried that Squadron X were gonna break free before he could explain that he was going to deactivate their inhibitor clamps from a distance."

On the eve of Impactor's trial — mere seconds, in fact, before he was led into the Aequitas chamber — Springer had told the remaining Wreckers that he'd made a decision: "I'll lead you. If we make it through this. I'll lead you."

He remembered the opening words of his testimony. "I saw him do it," he'd said, seconds after being hooked up to Aequitas. and he'd spoken with such clarity, such certainty, that the supercomputer — programmed as it was to detect ambiguity and equivocation — had nearly overloaded. Indeed, his account of the showdown on Pova had been so persuasive, and his defence of the other Wreckers' inaction so sincere, that the prosecution had declined to call any other witnesses. And the look of gratitude and relief on the faces of Roadbuster and Whirl and Broadside and Rack 'n Ruin had lifted him higher than Sherma Bridge.

Pova, and the Wreckers, were in a whole world of pain.

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Positions had been taken, battle lines drawn; one way or another, this was the end of the road for the Autobot commandos and their arch-enemies, Squadron X. Impactor sensed that this would soon be over — finished — and when he spoke to the others there was no mistaking the sense of finality in his voice.

"One way or another," he said tersely, "It ends tonight. Squadron X are evil, pure and simple. and it falls to us to put a stop to their reign of —

"No more."

Roadbuster stood up.

"Sorry. Springer, I just — No more fiction. If ever there was a time for truth, it's now. I can't let you die with a lie in your head."

He began walking around the circuit slab, wondering where to begin.

"We were angry. On the way to Pova, we were angry. All of us, even you. Especially you. But you... you were making Impactor worse. You were feeding him, pumping him up. D'you know what he used to call you? 'My little green circuit booster.' Said you could talk up a fight — get us all psyched up better than anyone. And it's true. You were on the bridge reminding us how Squadron X got their kicks murdering civilians and and blowing up peace envoys and stuff. I reckon by that point even Beachcomber would've ripped Macabre's head off given half the chance.

"When we landed, we thought we'd catch them doing something properly evil — torching a place of worship or something — but they were just refueling. We attacked, and they did what they did best: they fought back. And that was what you wanted, wasn't it, 'cos that gave you the excuse to let loose. The rest of us didn't need an excuse."

He stopped and looked at Springer.

"I'm torn, Springer. I'm torn. I could carry on or I could shut up, and I'm torn. If ever there was a good moment to give me a sign, this is it."

The ground did not shake. The ceiling did not split open. The abandoned datapad did mysteriously flicker of its own accord. And hundreds of miles below. Hydrus 5 kept turning.

Roadbuster sat down at the end of the circuit slab and studied his hands.

"When you dragged yourself towards the warehouse I remember trying to work out the extent of your injuries, trying to calculate how much lubricant you'd lost and how much more you could afford to lose. And I remember... I remember looking at Whirl, and Whirl looking at me, and I knew we were thinking the same thing: 'We need to intervene. We need to stop him. We need to stop him reaching the warehouse.'

"And then we heard the first gunshot. And the second, and the third. And we knew, Whirl and I, that we needn't have worried. You were too late.

"I gave Impactor the gun that killed Squadron X, and I'm proud of that. I'm proud of him: he did something I didn't have the guts to do myself. Squadron X deserved to die, and he earned the right to kill them.

"When you joined the team it was pretty clear that you were Impactor's favorite, but you didn't understand what it meant to be a Wrecker. That changed on Pova. When you barged into the warehouse and saw Impactor standing there, that's when you got it. That's when you understood."

He took Springer's hand in his own and noticed, fleetingly, that the knuckles resembled the Manganese Mountains.

"After Impactor was arrested at G'th Semene, the rest of us started to panic. Were you going to complain to High Command about us too? Were you going to testify against us when Impactor was put on trial, and say that we'd done nothing to stop him executing Squadron X?

"We all knew you fancied yourself as a leader. I mean, you would never have tried to usurp Impactor, but after Pova you clearly thought you were the right robot to — what's that phrase of Prowl's..? To 'course correct' us. To rein us in. So we... we played on that. We asked you... oh. Springer, here's the thing... We asked you to lead us so that you wouldn't testify against us. Because if you'd have said that we were complicit in what Impactor had done, we would've been sent down alongside him.

"And everything I'm saying— everything I've just said —is sort of a prelude to an apology. I can't speak for Whirl or Broadside, but for what it's worth, I'm — ah, you know what I'm saying. You were a good leader. You were our best leader. It just took us a long time to realize that."

He stopped and leaned closer to Springer's face. Was that a—?

No. Impossible.

Was that a tear in Springer's eye?

He grabbed a nearby magnification lens and looked closer, and— yes, it was a tear. A tear or a scar or a split; some microscopic fissure so small that despite all the cleansing and sterilizing he'd not spotted it until now.

In fact maybe it wasn't a tear; maybe it was just dirt. Maybe he'd not been as thorough as he could have been.

Frowning, he used his left hand to force back Springer's optical gutters and fully expose the eye. With his right thumb, he tried to wipe the 'tear' away. He rubbed. and rubbed harder, but still the mark remained in place.

He looked up as he heard a noise: a new noise. Before he'd even registered what he was doing, he reached for the path-blaster on his back and scanned the room for movement. Did the Nanocons have a combined mode? One that made them visible to the naked eye? He realised that the noise had come from a corridor within one of the life support machines: it had signaled the arrival of a new line on the ceiling-sized monitor screen, a line that rose and fell and kept pace with the pulse of a suddenly resurgent Spark.

With hands that for the first time in years were not trembling, he reexamined the tear in Springer's right eye.

Roadbuster knew very little about miracles, but he was certain that within the tear itself he could just about make out the merest hint of blue.

And not just any blue.

Matrix blue.