Summary

{Liliy, do you want me to come get you?} interrupted a new voice through the phone. “No, Leecher. I was about to say that I want to stay here. I want to see the fight.”
{But what if you are seen?} Leecher replied. “As long as I am careful, they won’t be able to tell the difference. After all, I have had centuries of practice at ‘being human’.”

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The Autobots and Decepticons are not the only Cybertronians on Earth. A group of Neutrals has called this planet home for a long time and for the most part they stayed out of everyone else's business. That is until their leader is unknowingly taken in by the Autobots.

Notes

The first few chapters are set in between 'Scrapheap' (s1e7) and 'Con Job' (s1e8).
The afternoon sun beat down on the empty highway. A woman strolled along beside it, whistling a merry tune. She was tall for a female human, measuring five inches over six feet. She walked with a small spring in her step, despite the large, black duffle bag weighing heavy on her right shoulder. Even though the day was warm, she wore a short, wool, hooded cape of grey, fastened by a single button at her throat. The gravel on the side of the two-lane road crunched under her gray leather boots that covered the bottoms of her dark gray jeans up to the knee. The only color on her seemed to be her red bangs. The rest of her short hair was platinum, parted from ear to ear by a grey headband. Her eyes, as well, lent a little color. They were almost blood red with an unnatural glow about them, the only indication that she might not be as human as she appeared.

After a while the whistling stopped. It took her a few minutes to realize that the sounds of the wildlife had stopped too. There was a faint, far away sound though, somewhat muted by the forest of trees along the highway. She stopped to listen, only to start when Beethoven’s Fifth filled the air around her. Realizing it was her cell phone, she pulled it out of her back pocket with her right hand. She didn’t even glance at the caller ID before she put the phone to her ear.

“Yes, Echo?” she asked.

{Just wanted to warn you, ma’am, that there is a cluster of Autobot and Decepticon signals moving closer to your position} replied the smooth voice on the other end.

“From the west?”

{Yes. They are still some distance away.}

“I can faintly hear them.”

{Would you like me to send you a ground bridge?}

“No. I-

{Lily, do you want me to come get you?} interrupted a new voice through the phone.

“No, Leecher. I was about to say that I want to stay here. I want to see the fight.”

{But what if you are seen?} Leecher replied.

“As long as I am careful, they won’t be able to tell the difference. After all, I have had centuries of practice at ‘being human’.”

{But-}

“I’ve made up my mind, Leecher. Watch over the 'boys' for me. I’ll call back when I can.”

Lily ended the call and pocketed her phone. Her facial features flickered briefly like a hologram and her eyes appeared more human with reddish-brown irises and no glow.

The sounds were louder now and more distinct. She could make out the blaster fire, the heavy footfalls, the clanging of metal on metal, and the snapping of trees and limbs. Minutes later, chaos in the form of giant robots erupted from the treeline fifty yards from the other side of the road.
The Autobots were grateful for the sudden open area. It made it easier to get at the Vehicons but it also meant the Cons could get at them easier as well. Arcee backflipped to avoid being backhanded. She caught a glimpse of the road as she did and had to turn to look again when she landed in a crouch. There was female human standing by the road. Her expression was oddly admiring, but her posture was tense. Heat singed across Arcee’s faceplates as a blaster bolt passed mere inches from her optics. She fell back on her aft and glared up at the advancing Con. With another glance at the human and a growl, she pushed off the grass covered ground and leapt at her attacker. A couple of punches and a slice from her arm blades and he was down. Arcee spared another glance at the road. The human was still there. One servo turned to a blaster to keep the Cons at bay while her other servo went to her commlink.

“Optimus,” she spoke urgently on the Autobot’s private channel to her leader, “we’ve been spotted by a human. Behind us, by the road.”

{Acknowledged} came the answer.

Liliy was fascinated. She had seen footage of skirmishes like this before but seeing it in person was quite different. Unlike the ‘friendly’ competition fights that her ‘boys’ did, this was a fight for survival. It hurt her spark to watch so many mechs fall and not get up again, but that was war, she knew. She could feel the ground trembling with movement of heavy bodies as they got closer to her. She heard the crunches and shrieks of abused metal plating. The smell of spilled energon and scorched material, both organic and non, filled the air.

The blue femme had spotted her and almost got her helm blown off for looking away from the battle. However, that did not stop her from glancing Liliy’s way every so often while she fought. Liliy pretended not to notice and focused on watching the tallest of the Autobots. Her attention wavered when a feeling of dread washed over her. Her sensors indicated incoming from the sky. She turned her gaze to the bright blue expanse that was dotted with a few wispy clouds. Seven dark shapes assumed a v-formation and a space bridge closed behind them. Liliy’s eyes went wide and she stiffened when she recognized the dark purple UAV in the lead.

The eradicons behind broke formation. Soundwave dropped back and let them take the lead. They saw the Autobots but they also saw the lone human standing by the road. She would be their first target. They fell into a dive and opened fire.

At the very last second, Liliy realized that she was the eradicons’ target. She was three steps across the road when the first couple bolts hit where she had been standing. The resulting shock wave knocked her flat on her face on the unforgiving asphalt and pelted her with rocks and dust. Liliy just laid there in a daze. Her optics flickered and her audio receptors rang with static. The ground shook beneath her. She wasn’t sure if it was more blaster fire or heavy footfalls, but it only served to worsen her headache. Everything went dark and silent momentarily as she reset her optics and audios.

When her optics came back online, her audios were taking longer to reset, she opened them and saw nothing but the side of a giant metal foot. She rolled onto her left side, the duffle bag preventing her from rolling fully onto her back. The dark foot led to a oversized, blue calf. The leg
continued up and up. Optimus Prime stood over her, shooting at the flyers.

A myriad of loud sounds assaulted her audio receptors. Blaster fire. Turning gears. Heavy footfalls. Moving metal. Pained grunts and groans. Liliy cringed and curled in on herself. Her receptors took another moment to adjust to a more tolerable level. She uncurled quickly and sat up to assess the situation.

The Autobots stood in a circle on the road. A few vehicons remained, coming at them from the forest. The eradicons transformed and landed on their other side. Soundwave stayed airborne, watching as he circled overhead. Since the flyers were now where Optimus could reach them, he lunged forward, leaving Liliy feeling very exposed. A loud snap resounded over the area. One of the eradicons broke a tree off near the roots. Wielding it like a lance, he used it to hit Optimus in the helm as the larger bot turned to face him.

Liliy looked up when a shadow passed over her. She cursed as she scrambled to her feet. The top edge of the plating on the middle of Prime’s back snagged her left shoulder. She could not feel the initial touch but she did feel her own plating bending out of place as more weight was added. Cringing, she twisted out from under him and stumbled backwards before falling on her aft.

“Optimus!” cried Arcee.

All the vehicons were down. Driven by concern for their leader, the other Autobots made quick work of the remaining eradicons. Soundwave, however, disappeared into a bridge just after Optimus fell.

Liliy just sat there rubbing her shoulder. There was no pain, no warnings on her HUD but she knew that her plating was bent out of shape. As long as she wasn’t bleeding, she wasn’t going to worry about it. Her holographic layer would hide the damage. She noticed then that the ground was vibrating. Optimus’ shoulder was only a few feet from her and she was sitting between his helm and his left smoke stack.

Optimus groaned as he came back online. The increased vibrations from his frame caused Liliy to flinch. The other three Autobots gathered around him, concerned.

“Optimus, are you ok?” asked Bulkhead.

“Where is the human?” responded Prime, his voice staticy.

“On your left,” Liliy answered.

Optimus turned his helm and looked at her out of the corner of his optic. She scooted away from his helm so he could see her.

“Hey.” She offered a small smile.

“Are-” There was more static in his voice. He reset his vocalizer. It helped a little. “Are you alright?”

“Just peachy considering I was just shot at, thrown about, and nearly flattened.” Her tone carried a hint of sarcasm, but it was lost when she spoke again. “What about you? Are you alright? Cause, you know, you just got hit in the face with a tree.”

“I am fine.”

“I don’t know, Optimus. Can you retract your battle mask with that big dent in it?” asked Arcee.
Instead of answering her, Optimus sat up. The ground stopped vibrating. Liliy watched as the Autobots helped their leader completely to his feet. She grimaced when he turned around to look down at her and she got the full view of his face. The dent wasn’t just in his battle mask. The vent on the right side of his helm was bent and smashed, meaning the dent most likely went all the way to his face plates. Liliy shrank away when Optimus knelt on one knee to get a closer look at her. She masked her concern over the small trickle of energon dripping off his chin by pretending to be afraid of him.

“We mean you no harm,” he said gently, his baritone still laced with static, “but we cannot leave you here. Our enemies might come back and they will harm you if they find you. Will you please come with us? We will explain everything to you once we return to the safety of our base.”

Liliy looked at the faces of the other Autobots. They all seemed a bit tense still, ready to go. The humanoid femme sighed as she got to her feet. She looked back up Optimus.

“Alright. I’ll go with you. But only because it looks like you are bleeding and I doubt you would agree to leave me if I said no.”

“What?” exclaimed Arcee.

She came around to Prime’s front as the mech put a servo to his chin and pulled it away to find his digits wet with energon. Arcee’s servo went to her commlink.

“Ratchet, we need a ground bridge. Optimus has been injured.”

“Woah,” Liliy breathed in feigned surprise when the pale green vortex spiraled to life not far from them a moment later. “We’re going through that?”

“Yep,” answered Bulkhead. “Don’t worry, it’s perfectly safe.”

“Uh-huh,” Liliy muttered. She followed Optimus as Arcee led him into the ground bridge. Bulkhead and Bumblebee brought up the rear.

Well, Liliy thought as she took her first step into the shining vortex, here goes nothing!
That was Lily’s first thought when she stepped out of the ground bridge. She had seen the outside of the butte in some flyover surveillance videos but it was a lot bigger on the inside than she was expecting. She recognized the place to be an old missile silo, probably from the Cold War. There was lots of concrete and metal. Three concrete tiers and a platform took up almost half the space and an elevator shaft rose from the top tier to meet with the ceiling. Catwalks were everywhere in the upper reaches of the room. There were at least three hallways leading off in different directions. Lily assumed one of them had to lead to the outside. The added alien tech dwarfed the human-sized objects but, strangely, it did not look too out of place.

Lily turned around and inspected the ground bridge. It was a deep hole cut into the only part of the silo walls that was bare rock face. Compared to the bridge technology she was used to, this was rudimentary and crudely built, but impressive considering the limited resources of the Autobots.

“No talking or I will deactivate your vocalizer until I am done!” the voice warned.

Noting the giant Autobot emblem on the floor in front of the ground bridge, Lily made her way over to the large staircase near where the Bots stood that allow human access to the tiers. She climbed up to the first tier so she could see better. Optimus was laying on a med berth, helm hidden by the back of a white and orange mech. Lily looked over at the three bots who stood watching.

“Is he going to be ok?” she asked.

The white and orange mech paused and shot a stern glare at her over his shoulder.

“Another human?” he growled. He looked at the other bots. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Well-” Optimus started.

“I didn’t ask you, Optimus! No talking!” Ratchet snapped, glaring down at his patient for a second before looking back up at the bots for an answer.

“She saw us fighting the Cons,” Bulkhead explained with a shrug. “And when their reinforcements showed up, they targeted her.”

“Soundwave saw Optimus protecting her,” added Arcee, missing the tiny flinch from their new guest at the name of the Decepticon. “She was alone and there wasn’t town for miles around. Optimus wasn’t about to leave her there.”

Ratchet sighed heavily and looked down at Optimus. The larger mech stared up at him. The medic
shook his helm and spoke again as he went back to work.

“You could of left her there.”

“Oh, yes. Let’s leave the potentially injured human by herself on the side of the road, miles from civilization. That’s nice,” commented Liliy sarcastically.

That perked Ratchet’s interest and he paused again, glancing over his shoulder with something akin to concern. “Injured?”

“Pretty sure I got a minor concussion when I was knocked to the ground by blaster fire,” Liliy told him nonchalantly. “I still have a headache. But don’t worry about me. I have survived worse. Is, uh, he going to be ok?” She pointed at the Prime.

“Yes. I’ll have him as good as new in no time.” His attention went back to Optimus.

Liliy smiled. “Thanks good to hear.” She looked at the other bots. “My name is Liliy, by the way.”

“Arcee,” said the blue femme.

“I’m Bulkhead. This is Bumblebee.” The big green mech laid a servo on the shoulder of the yellow mech who waved at her. He pointed at the white and orange mech. “That our medic, Ratchet. And our leader, Optimus Prime.”

"Nice to meet you. Um, so if I had to make an educated guess, I'd say you're all giant alien robots from some distant planet fighting a war, not only for your own survival but also to protect this planet and its inhabitants. Am I right?"

Ratchet actually stopped and looked at her, surprised.

"What gave the alien part away?" asked Arcee.

"Because you give off too much emotion to be artificial intelligence so you are obviously sentient. And the glyphs on your monitors are no language of Earth, past or present." Because I am the same as you, she added mentally.

"Wow. I'm impressed," Arcee said.

"Oh, pah-lease," said Ratchet, waving dismissively and going back to repairing Optimus.

Liliy yawned into her hand. "Ah. Sorry. Do you mind if I take a nap now? All that excitement made me tired."

“No. You can’t sleep until I have a look at you,” ordered Ratchet. “And I can’t do that until I’m done fixing Optimus.”

“Allright, alright. I’m just gonna go sit down then.”

"It's almost time for us to pick up the kids from school anyways," commented Bulkhead. “So we’ll be heading out.”

“Don’t bring them back here until I say so, understood?” commanded Ratchet.

“Yes, Ratchet,” answered Arcee.

As the three younger bots transformed and rolled out, Liliy finished climbing the stairs to the top
tier where the human-sized rec area was. There was a chair, a couch, a coffee table, and an entertainment center complete with a tv and a game console.

*Kids?* She thought as she dropped her duffle bag next to the stuffed, yellow chair before plopping down in said chair and putting her feet up on the makeshift coffee table. It was a door laid across four cinder blocks stood on end. *So they have other humans to look after. No wonder they have been frequenting the nearby town recently.*

She pulled out her phone and some earbuds. Liliy glanced over her shoulder. Ratchet was busy working and not paying any attention to her. She stuck the earbuds in her ears and started some music. After pulling her hood up and over her eyes, she laid her head back and went into recharge.

"Hm, what time is it?" Liliy asked tiredly, her hood falling off as she lifted her head. Her music had stopped hours ago but she had slept on.

Ratchet, the only other person in the room, answered. "Just after 3 A.M. I thought I told you not to go to sleep. And you only said you were going to take a nap, not sleep for 12 hours."

He stood at the main computer console, staring up at the three big monitors in front of him.

Liliy chuckled. "Sorry. I guess I was more tired than I thought."

Pulling out her earbuds, she set aside her phone and unbuttoned her cape so that when she stood up it remained in the chair. Hearing her sigh as she stretched, Ratchet looked over at her. His optics widened in surprise when she turned to face him and he saw that her left arm was gone, the empty three-quarter sleeve of her light grey shirt folded and pinned up so it wouldn't flap around. Liliy gave him an amused smirk when he looked away and tried to hide his surprise behind a fake cough.

"Well, it's good to see that you are finally awake. Do you still have a headache?" he asked.

"Nope. It's gone."

"That's good," he said, turning back to the computer.

"So, where are the others?" Liliy asked, walking over to the rail to watch him work after she had scanned the room. She could only sense one other spark within the base.

"I sent Optimus to his quarters to recharge after I was done fixing him. The other three are on curb duty until the children get up. Since today is Saturday, they don't have school so they'll be coming straight here."

"Ha, sounds like life is exciting around here."

Ratchet let out an exasperated sigh. "You have no idea. I'm surprised they didn't wake you with all the noise they made when I finally let them come back to base. Miko wanted to wake you up right away but I told her to let you sleep-even though you weren't supposed to be." He shot a glare at her. She just shrugged. "Then they were playing video games and got into a loud argument right there on the couch. Bulkhead had to pick Miko up and take her out of the room to get her to stop yelling."

She chuckled. "Yes, well, as soon as I put my music on and fall asleep I become oblivious to the world around me. It is both a good and a bad thing, I suppose." She turned and went back to the
After retrieving a black, leather-bound notebook and a pencil case from her bag, she sat down. Opening to the first blank page, she pulled out a pencil. She glanced over at the orange and white medic and noticed that he appeared to be lost in thought as he stared up at the monitors. Softly smiling, Liliy put pencil to paper in an effort to capture that moment.

The roar of three loud engines entering the room, one accompanied by the blasting of heavy metal, caused Liliy to jerk awake.

I fell into recharge again? She thought as she closed the notebook on her lap and set it on the coffee table with the pencil case on top. She glanced at Ratchet who looked rather annoyed that his peace and quiet was over as he turned to watch the arrivals. Buttoning her cape back on, Liliy got up, yawning, and went over to the rail to watch as well. The children left their rides, allowing them to unfold and stand up.

"Good morning, Liliy," said Optimus, entering from the hallway opposite the other bots. "Did you sleep well?"

All eyes swiveled to look up at her. She smiled at him.

"Yes, Optimus. Thank you. And you are looking much better than the last time I saw you."

The tall mech smiled back.

"Alright! She's finally awake," exclaimed Miko, running up the stairs. She stopped next to her but, before she could even begin to bombard the woman with questions, Liliy put a finger on the girl's lips.

"You should introduce yourself first before asking questions."

Miko gave her a scrutinizing look. "Are you Japanese?"

"Canadian." Liliy smirked, amused. "Namae wa?"

Miko looked surprised and then annoyed at the use of her native language. "Miko Nakadai."

Liliy smiled. "Yoroshiku, Nakadai Miko-chan." She looked at the boys who had just joined them. "And you two are?"

"Jack Darby," said the tall, dark haired one.

"Rafael Esquivel. But most people just call me Raf," answered the young burnette, pushing up his glasses.

"Well, nice to meet you too, Raf, Jack. My name is Liliy."

"What brings a Canadian to the States?" asked Jack.

"I love to travel. Usually I have a car but I had to leave it behind this time. So I have been hitchhiking and walking across the States. That is until I met these guys. " She waved a hand at the Autobots. "And almost died."

"We know what that's like," said Jack.
"So what do you do for a living?" asked Miko.

"I don’t do anything right now. But I have dabbled in a lot of things over the years. Medicine, robotics, linguistics, computer science, auto mechanics, as well as art and music, just to name a few."

"Dude, how old are you?"

"That’s classified."

"Ah, come on. Seriously?"

Liliy just smiled.

"Fine. What kind of music? Do you like heavy metal? Can you play an instrument? I play the electric guitar."

The tall woman mentally shook her head. This girl just too curious. I have to be careful.

"I occasionally get in the mood for heavy metal but I actually prefer the softer stuff. Usually just instrumental. As far as playing an instrument, no, I can't. I'm usually the one in the booth doing the recording and making everyone else sound good."

"If you are an artist, do you draw? Can you show us a piece of your work?" asked Raf.

"Yes and yes." Liliy went over to the makeshift coffee table and opened her notebook to the page she was on last night. She showed it to them.

She said, "Check it out. I did this last night."

"Whoa. You are really good," said Miko, looking at the incredibly detailed pencil drawing of Ratchet. "Can you draw me?"

"Strike a pose," Liliy said, laying the notebook back on the table and grabbing her phone. Miko immediately did her 'rock on' pose. Liliy snapped her picture. "There. Now you don't have to hold the pose while I draw."

Liliy set her phone on the arm of the chair and pulled a drawing pad out of her bag. Sitting in the chair, she grabbed another pencil from the pencil bag. The three children gathered around the back of the chair in great interest as she began to draw. To the amazement of the Autobots, Liliy was able to hold their attention for the 30 minutes that she took to draw Miko. After signing and dating the drawing, she removed the page from the pad and handed it to the Asian girl.

"Hey, Bulk. Check it out," said the girl, hold up the picture for the big Autobot to see.

"That's amazing, Miko. It looks just like you. What are you going to do with it?"

"I think we should get some tape and hang it on the wall in your room," said the girl, running down the stairs and off to the mech’s quarters with the Wrecker trailing behind.

Chapter End Notes
Japanese translation:
"Namae wa?" = "(Your) Name is?"
"Yoroshiku" = "Nice to meet you"

As much as I admire the language, I know very little so I promise this the only time I will use it.
“Um, hey, Bumblebee or Bulkhead?”

The two mechs looked down at Liliy.

“Could I ride into town with one of you to get the children?” she asked. “I would like to go to the store to get a few things. That is...” She turned to look up at Prime who was standing nearby. “If that’s ok with you, Optimus? That I leave the base?”

“I don’t see why you can’t as long as you stay close to one of the bots,” answered the tallest mech.

“Oh, of course.” She turned back to the other two. “So who am I riding with?”

“Well, actually, I think Miko and I had plans for this afternoon,” said Bulkhead.

“I see. Bee?”

“Sure, I can take you,” the muscle car beeped.

“Sweet.”

“Wait, Liliy, you can understand Bee?” Bulkhead asked.

“Yeah,” Liliy replied with a shrug. “I think it just comes with being a computer whiz.”

Bumblebee transformed and opened his driver door for Liliy. She slipped in behind the wheel and they were off, his door closing as they went. About halfway to town, Bumblebee noticed that Liliy seemed nervous. Her posture was tense and she was fidgeting with the edge of her cloak while staring out the door window rather than at least pretending like she was driving.

“You ok?” he chirped.

She jumped and her head whipped around to stare at the dashboard.

“Huh?” She raised her right hand to cover her face and let out a sigh. “Yeah. Sorry. I just can’t get used to the idea that I’m sitting inside another living being.”

“I guess it is kinda weird, isn’t it?”

“Just a little. I think it’s making me car sick.”

“Well, don’t worry. We’re almost there.”

Bumblebee let Liliy out once they reached the school parking lot. She leaned against his side after his door shut again.

“Are you better now?” he beeped quietly.

“What’s the matter?” asked Arcee who was parked next to them.

“I just got a little car sick is all. I’ll be ok,” Liliy reassured them.

“What were you doing, Bee?” asked Bulkhead from the other side of Arcee. “Driving crazy?”
“No. His driving was fine. It’s me,” said Lily.

The school bell rang and the children came out. They came over when they spotted the trio of vehicles.

“Lily, what are you doing here?” asked Miko once they were close enough.

“I wanted to go shopping so I had Bee bring me into town,” Lily replied. “Is that alright with you, Raf?”

“Yeah. I’m fine with it,” answered Raf.

“Oh, shopping!” squealed Miko. “Can I come?”

“I guess. But Bulkhead said you had plans.” Lily glanced at the green off-roader.

“It’s just dune smashing.” Miko waved it off. “We can do that some other time.”

“Alright. And you, Jack?” Lily turned to oldest boy. “Want to come with us?”

“Sure. I don’t have to work today anyway."

“Alright then,” Lily said, “anyone know where I can get some good art supplies?”

Later, they sat around a picnic table at the town park with the Bots parked nearby. The children were eating some snacks that Lily bought for them.

“Hey, Lily, aren’t you hot in that cloak?” asked Jack. “It looks heavy.”

"No. Not really," Lily replied. “I just wear it because people tend to stare when I don't.”

"What do you mean?” asked Raf curiously.

Lily could almost feel the Bots’ attention suddenly intent on her. She glanced at them briefly before turning away from them. She used her right hand to lift the left side of her cloak and show the children her empty sleeve.

"People tend to stare a lot when you don't look like everyone else," she said quietly.

The children stared in shock. Lily dropped the edge of her cloak.

"That's..." Miko started at a moment, "actually kind of cool! How did you lose it? Did it get ripped off or were you born like that?"


Lily's eyes darkened as her gaze turned to the table top. "I lost it when I was younger."

They all could sense the anger that lay beneath her calm, quiet reply.

"Oh. I'm sorry," said Miko, quietly. “Does... does it still hurt? I mean I've heard that people who lose their limbs often have phantom pains.”

“No. It doesn’t hurt,” Lily replied. “But trying to find a possible replacement is what inspired me to study medicine and robotics.”
Miko brightened. “A robotic arm? That would be awesome.”

Liliy finally smiled. “Hmh. Yes. Yes it would.” She stood up. “Well then, ready to head back to base?”

“Yes.”

“Sure.”

“Let’s go.”

The children threw away their trash and went to their respective guardians. Liliy opened Bumblebee’s driver door and stared at the empty seat.

“I can speed a little after we get out of town to shorten the trip,” Bumblebee offered, sensing her hesitation.

“Thanks, Bee,” she replied gratefully as she slipped into the seat and shut the door.

“Something wrong?” asked Raf.

Bumblebee backed out of the parking space and followed Arcee and Bulkhead onto the street. Liliy didn’t say a word until they were headed out of town.

“How do you do it, Raf?” asked Liliy in an uncertain tone. “How can you sit there so calmly knowing that you are inside a living machine?”

“Uh…” Raf tilted his head as he looked over the dash. “I’ve never really thought about it before. Maybe it’s because Bee saved me and I know he won’t hurt me. Does the idea really bother you that much?”

Liliy seemed to curl in on herself.

“Yes,” she replied quietly. “And I don’t know why. It would make things so much easier if…” She trailed off, staring at nothing.

“If what?” asked Raf, concerned.

Liliy didn’t answer.

“Liliy?” Bumblebee chirped.

“Huh?” Her head jerked up. “Sorry. Did I space out again?”

“Again?” inquired Raf.

“…Yes…”

“Sorry, Bee. Are we almost there yet?”

“We’re coming up on it now.”

Bumblebee slowed down as he entered the silo’s hidden tunnel. Liliy had the door open before he even stopped rolling and she was out of the car the moment he stilled. Pausing, she took a deep breath in and then blew it all out. She felt a little better after that.
“Could you pop your trunk, Bee?” she asked, circling around behind him as Raf got out.

The yellow trunk opened for her. Liliy reached in and pulled out an easel, three poster-sized pads of paper, and a bag of other art supplies. She set the stuff on the floor beside her and closed the trunk lid. Bumblebee transformed and knelt before her.

“Are you sure you’re going to be ok?”

“Yes, Bumblebee. Thank you. It will just be awhile before I go for a ride again,” replied Liliy.

“Did something happen?” asked Ratchet, overhearing them.

“Just a case of car sickness. I’m fine now.”

“You get car sick?” Miko made it sound like the idea was ridiculous.

“Not usually. Now make yourself useful and help me carry these things up the stairs. Could you guys help as well?”

Miko huffed but went over and picked up a pad of paper.

“That’s right. You can’t carry everything because you only have one hand.”

Liliy rolled her eyes.

“Is that what you meant by not looking like everyone else?” asked Arcee.

“Yes. I am missing my entire left arm down to the shoulder joint.” This time Liliy flipped the cloak over her left shoulder so everyone could see the empty sleeve. “It brings up some painful memories so, please, don’t ask about it.”

“What about a prosthetic?” asked Ratchet.

“I usually keep it in my car so I don’t have it this trip.”

“Do you want to go get it?”

“No thanks. I can manage just fine without it.” Liliy flipped her cloak back down and picked up the easel.

Jack picked up the other two pads of paper and Raf got the bag. They followed Liliy up to the top tier.

“Where do you want these?” asked Jack.

“Hmm.” Liliy looked around. Then she spotted a place she liked. “Up there.”

“Up?” Raf adjusted his glasses.

They followed her gaze up the elevator to the catwalks two stories up.

“Why there?”

“Cause I like high places.”

She poked the elevator button with the corner of the easel. The doors opened and she stepped inside. She looked at the kids.
“Coming?”

“Yeah.”

The boys followed Miko into the elevator. Liliy poked a button on the inside and the doors closed. The Bots watched the elevator go up and stop at the second catwalk. The doors opened and Liliy came out. She stepped to the rail and looked down at the Autobots.

“Are you sure that’s alright, Liliy?” Optimus asked.

The corner of her mouth turned upward for a small smirk.

“This will do just fine.” She turned to the children. “Just leave the stuff next to the door. I’ll move it later.”

They did as they were told and then they all filed back into the elevator.

“Hey, Liliy, do you have a room in the back picked out yet? You know, since you’re going to be staying here for a while,” Miko asked as they stepped out of the elevator at the bottom.

“No, I don’t. I just slept in the chair last couple of nights.”

“That won’t do at all. Let’s go pick a room.”

Miko ran over and grabbed the strap of Liliy’s duffel bag. She tried to lift it but could barely get it to budge.

“Geeze. What do you have in here? This thing is heavier than Jack.”

Liliy laughed. “Just the essentials. Also how do you know how much Jack even weighs?”


“Alright,” Liliy laughed again.

She took the strap from Miko and easily lifted the bag onto her right shoulder.

“Well then,” she smiled down a Miko, “lead the way, Nakadai-san.”

Miko scowled at her but led the way down the stairs and into the bowels of the base. After looking at several human-sized rooms, Liliy shook her head.

“Nope. None of these rooms will do. I think I’m just going stay on the catwalk with my art supplies.”

“But.”

“It’s ok, Miko. I’m fine with it.”

So, Liliy took up residence on the middle catwalk off the elevator so she could ‘keep an eye on things’. 
A few days later, Liliy was sitting in her usual spot in the rec area, the stuffed chair, occupied with reading something on her phone when Ratchet announced that he was receiving a signal on a restricted band.

“It appears to be coming from a starship inside this solar system,” he explained to Optimus.

Curious, Liliy got up and moved over to the rail while Ratchet tapped a few keys.

“It’s an Autobot identification beacon.”

“So there are other Bots out there?” Jack asked, turning to look at the Bots in the room. He stood on the catwalk that crossed in front of the three big monitors for the Bots’ main computer console.

“The masses scattered to the galaxies when Cybertron finally went dark,” Arcee answered. “But Cons have been known to bait traps with false beacons.”

“Unknown vessel, this is Autobot Outpost Omega One. Identify yourself,” Optimus spoke into the comm link, his tone hard.

{I’ve had warmer welcomes from Decepticon combat brigades,} replied smooth voice from the link after a bit of static.

“Wheeljack?!” blurted Bulkhead. “You old Con crusher, what are you doing all the way out here?” The ex-wrecker stepped closer to the console.

{Bulkhead? That you? What’s with all the security?}

“The rock we’re on is crawling with Cons. How soon can you get here and even the odds?”

{Sometime tomorrow if I put metal to the pedal.}

“Another Bot’s coming here,” commented Miko from her spot on Bulkhead’s shoulder. “How cool is that?”


“He is one thousand percent the real deal, Optimus.”

Prime turned back to the comm. “We will send landing coordinates, Wheeljack. Safe journey.”

“See ya soon, buddy,” added Bulkhead “I’ll make sure you get a proper welcome.”

The call dropped.

“So who’s the boyfriend?” Arcee asked Bulkhead.

“Ha ha. Me and Jackie go way back. We were part of the same war unit, the Wreckers.” He slammed his fist into his palm. “Which means the Cons are gonna wish he never found us.”

Liliy hummed to herself with interest as she returned to the chair and sent instructions to Echo to be on the lookout for Wheeljack’s ship and any Con activity upon his arrival. During the night, she
received a coded message from Ucon, her spy on the Nemesis, warning her that the Cons were planning something and to be on guard.

The next day everyone was gathered in the main room for the new Bot’s arrival. The children stood in front of the big monitors while Liliy leaned on the railing around the top tier.

“Wheeljack’s ship is approaching the landing zone,” said Arcee.

“Do you think he’s here to visit?” Raf asked his human friends.

“Maybe he’ll stay. Hmm. Have to find his own human though,” said Miko. “Oh, I know. Liliy can be his partner. How bout it, Liliy?”

“No thanks. I’m fine with being a homebody,” replied Liliy.

The humans looked over when they heard Ratchet at the bridge controls.

“Ground bridge cycling up.”

The controls suddenly sparked and the monitor flicked with snow. Ratchet, annoyed, slammed his fist on the top of the panel and it started working again.

“Blasted scraplets. The equipment hasn’t been the same since the infestation,” he commented.

_Yikes. Scraplets? Glad I wasn’t here for that,_ thought Liliy.

“So Wheeljack’s gonna land halfway around the world and then you’ll bridge him here?” Jack asked Prime.

“We can’t risk revealing the location of our base,” answered Optimus while Miko noticed Bulkhead was pacing. “Just in case the Decepticons are tracking Wheeljack’s ship.”

“Which they are,” Liliy muttered to herself as Miko moved so she could talk to Bulkhead.

“Dude, I’ve never seen you so stoked,” Miko pointed out.

Bulk turned to her. “Oh, you’re gonna love Wheeljack. We were like brothers and tonight we are gonna party!”

“Sweet!” Miko exclaimed.

The alarm started sounding then.

“Bogies,” Arcee stated. “Closing fast on Wheeljack’s position.”

“Con scum!” growled Bulk.

“So it beings,” Liliy sighed as she moved away from the monitors. She pulled out her phone and texted Echo. They were going to let things play out but they needed to keep track of Wheeljack’s signal at all times. Liliy glanced up at the monitors.

“They stopped moving,” she observed. “Do you think they shot down his ship?”

“Probably,” replied Prime. “But the signal is still there so the ship must not be too damaged.”
“Open the bridge, Ratchet,” Bulkhead demanded. “We’re missing all the action.”

“I’ll prepare the medbay,” Ratchet said as he activated the controls and the bridge whirled to life.

“Ha ha. Who for? The Cons?” replied Bulk. “This is Wheeljack we’re talking about.”

Liliy’s phone beeped as the ex-wrecker, Arcee and Bumblebee disappeared. Wheeljack’s signal was no longer on the ground in the desert but far, far above it. Liliy was about to tell Prime that it might be a trap when Arcee called for a bridge back to base.

Well, well, well. Who do we have here? she thought, eyeing the newcomer as he met Miko and then greeted Prime. According to the report she just received, he was actually the Decepticon known as Makeshift, a bot with the ability to transform into almost anyone. This is going to be interesting.

She wandered up to her corner to get her notebook. Then she came down and sat in a computer chair near Ratchet while he worked on the ground bridge controls. That was her effort to ‘join’ the party that was now taking place. She had noticed that the medic looked as if he want to follow his leader when Prime left to go for a drive.

There was a game of lobing in play. Liliy flinched when the ball crashed into the wall near Ratchet after ‘Wheeljack’ failed to catch it.

“You know, I am attempting to perform sensitive calibrations here?” complained Ratchet.

“Sorry, Doc,” the imposter said as he picked up the ball, “I guess we’re a little charged up.”

He paused behind Ratchet who had gone back to working on the controls.

“You built this bridge from scratch huh?” he inquired.

That got Liliy’s attention but she pretended to not be listening.

“I did,” Ratchet answered.

“That’s quite a feat of engineering.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Something wrong with it?”

“I didn’t care for the way it sounded this last jump. I put it in shutdown.”

“What if you need to use it?”

“Oh, I can’t disrupt the defrag process without causing irreparable damage.”

“So, uh, how long will the defrag take?”

“A few hours,” he said, turning to glance at him, “if we’re lucky. Maybe longer.” He shrugged and turned back to the controls.

“Huh.” The imposter moved on.

“Nosy, isn’t he?” commented Liliy.
“Hm?” Ratchet glanced up at her.

“Nothing.” She got up and moved over to the rec area.

A little later, Bulkhead gathered everyone, except Ratchet, around for storytime. He told about some of the missions he and Jackie went on together.

“Have you guys ever had to improvise? You know, like make a *makeshift* grenade or something,” Liliy asked, putting a little extra emphasis on the Con’s name as she looked him in the optics.

He stared at her in shock. She just shrugged with a smirk and looked up at Bulkhead when he answered.

“Hm, yeah. Once or twice, I think.” He notice the other mech’s shocked gaze. “Hey, you alright?” He waved his servo in the other’s face.

“What?” asked the imposter.

“You don’t seem like yourself.”

“Well, what do ya mean?”

“I don’t know. You seem… quiet.”

“Ah. I been stuck in a can too long. I should go topside before I go stir crazy.”

“I have patrol in the morning. You can come with.”

“Well, let’s go now.”

“And break up the party? Come on. The gang’s loving you. You gotta tell ‘em about the battle of Darkmount Pass.”

“You tell ‘em. You’re better at it. How bout Miko here shows me the rest of your base?”

“Yeah. Sure, Jackie. Go ahead.”

“Tour starts now,” Miko said, hopping off the storage crate she and Raf were sitting on. “Do you play an instruments? Can you fly? Have you thrashed more Decepticons than Bulkhead?” she asked as they walked off.

Bulkhead watched them go.

“You alright?” Arcee asked him.

“Yeah. Just out of sorts I guess.”

“Don’t tell me, you’re jealous?”

“That Miko’s making a new friend? Come on.” He looked at the hall. “Something… Something’s just not right about Wheeljack.”

“Bulk, really? He’s traveled galaxies. You haven’t seen him for centuries. He could just be rocket-lagged. Or… Well, bots do change, ya know.”
“Not Jackie.”

“I kind of agree with Bulkhead.”

They looked at Liliy after she spoke.

“I mean, obviously I’ve never met the guy before so I really don’t know but… something about him just doesn’t feel right. Like the way he was questioning Ratchet about the ground bridge.”

“He could just be concerned about an escape route in case of an emergency,” countered Arcee.

Meanwhile, in the brig on the Nemesis…

Wheeljack pretended not to notice the guard change. His shoulder joints were beginning to ache from hanging there. He groaned and shifted, momentarily relieving the strain on one arm. He caught the attention of the new guard, an eradicon, who approached him. But he stopped just out of his reach, much to the Wrecker’s disappointment. The Con crossed his arms over his chassis.

“I’m not as dumb as you think, Autobot. I know what you are trying to do.”

The Wrecker frowned. “And what am I trying to do?”

“Lure me in close and use me to escape.”

Wheeljack looked away. Then the eradicon said something that made the Bot stare with wide-eyed surprise.

“It’s alright though. I was intending to let you escape anyway. But you have to do one thing for me.”

Wheeljack narrowed his optics suspiciously.

“What is it?”

“Don’t kill me.”

The Con activated his blaster and stepped within range of the Wrecker’s foot.

“You got it.”

Wheeljack smirked as he twisted and kicked the eradicon in the face.

The guard spun and fired three shots at the control panel before he hit the floor. Two of the blasts found their mark, successfully freeing Wheeljack. He dropped to his pedes.

“Thanks,” he muttered as he stepped over the offline Con and headed for the door.

Back at Omega One…

“Look. I know Wheeljack better than anyone,” Bulkhead said.

“Hey,” the imposter said, coming back from his tour. “What are you guys talking about?”
“I was just telling the guys all about you and me... at the battle of Darkmount Pass.”

“That’s a heck of a story.”

“Yep. Tell it.”

“Talk, talk, talk,” interrupted Miko. “How ’bout after we go offroading?”

“Miko, stay out of this,” Bulkhead waved her off.

“Bulkhead,” cautioned Arcee, “easy.”

“I’m not sure I-” started the imposter.

“Tell it!” demanded Bulkhead

“Fine. You wanna live in the past, Bulkhead.”

Knowing Bulkhead was about to call the Con out on his lies, Liliy came down to the main floor to join the others while the imposter told the story.

“Isn’t that how it happened?” he asked Bulkhead after he finished the tale.

“Yeah. That’s exactly how it happened.”

The Con smirked.

“Except for one little thing...” Bulkhead continued. “I wasn’t there!”

That shocked everyone. The Con glared, knowing he was caught.

“I had already left the Wreckers to join up with Optimus. But you wouldn’t know that if all you did was access Wheeljack’s public service record.”

“Bulkhead,” Miko said, "what does that have to do with- Whoa!”

Anticipating the Con's movements, Liliy shoved Miko out of the way and got grabbed up by the white mech instead.

"Liliy!” cried Miko as the mech moved over to bridge controls with the woman in his grasp.

“Stay back,” the Con said in gravelly voice. “Or I’ll squeeze her into pulp.” He glared at Ratchet who backed off.

“Wheeljack, what are you doing?” asked Miko.

“Con coward,” growled Bulkhead. “Let the woman go and face me.”

“Don’t fret, plenty of fighting to come.”

“Is there a real Wheeljack?” asked Jack.

“Oh, indeed. And I except Lord Starscream is making sport of him.”

All the while, Liliy pretended to be helpless but was prepared to cut his hand if he did try to crush her. However she couldn’t help taunting him.
“So does this mean you are a makeshift Autobot?”

He squeezed a little harder making her grimace.

“How in the Pit did you know my name?” he growled.

She shrugged. “Lucky guess.”

With a snarl, Makeshift tapped away at the controls.

“About time,” he snapped, opening a bridge to the Con ship. He moved to the opening. “Let’s get this party started.”

Suddenly he was knocked down by the real Wheeljack who came thru the portal before the Cons could. Liliy flew out of Makeshift’s hand and was caught by Bulkhead, who set her gently back on her feet. Miko instantly hugged her for a moment before turning to look at Wheeljack.

“I’d shut that hole before the stink comes thru,” he suggested.

Ratchet shut off the ground bridge as Makeshift got to his feet. He drew his swords and Wheeljack did the same. They circled. Pounding his fist into his palm, Bulkhead took a step forward to join the fight but Wheeljack stopped him with a blade.

“Ugly’s mine.”

They went at it.

“Which one is the real Wheeljack?” asked Raf as the Bot and Con battled.

“Uh…” Miko pointed from one to the other. “I lost track.”

Wheeljack finished the fight by knocking Makeshift out.

“That’s my Jackie,” commented Bulk proudly.

The Wrecker sheathed his swords and looked at Ratchet.

“You, hit the switch. It’s time to take out the trash.” He turned to Bulkhead who came up next to him. “All yours, buddy.”

Bulkhead picked the Con up, spun him around, threw him into the portal.

“Nice lobe,” complimented Wheeljack as the portal closed.

Since Makeshift was thrown out, Liliy went back up to her easel to draw.

When it was time for the Wrecker to leave, she went with the others to see him off.

"Wheeljack?” she asked.

He looked down at her. "What’s up?"

"You don't really seem like the sentimental type to me but," she held up a page out of her poster-sized drawing pad, "I wanted you to have this."
Bulkhead looked over Wheeljack's shoulder as he took the paper. It was a pencil drawing of the two Wreckers together with Miko sitting on Bulkhead's shoulder and they were all smiling.

"I don't remember posing for that," said Bulkhead.

Liliy laughed. "It's pretty good for drawing from memory, huh?"

Wheeljack smiled and looked at her. "You're right. I'm really not. But I will keep this. Thanks."

"You're welcome."
Liliy came out of recharge with a slight jolt. Her sensors were warning her that a ground bridge opened nearby.

“Are you sure about this, Optimus?” she heard Ratchet ask.

“It is the best option at this time,” Prime replied.

Liliy got to her feet and adjusted her cloak on her shoulders. From her space on the catwalk, she could see most of the command center. Arcee, Bulkhead, and Bumblebee stood waiting by the active ground bridge. Optimus stood next Ratchet by the bridge controls. And the children were gathered on the platform above said controls.

Wondering what was going on, Liliy hurried to the elevator.

“Autobots, roll out!” Optimus’ command rang out just as the doors slid closed.

She took the elevator down the top tier.

“Where are they going?” she asked as the Bots disappeared and the bridge powered down.

“They are going to assist Agent Fowler,” answered Ratchet.

“Agent Fowler?” repeated Liliy, confused.

“Oh, that’s right. You haven’t got to meet him yet,” said Miko.

“Special Agent Fowler is the Bots’ liaison to the government basically,” supplied Jack.

“The Bots just left to help him transport something called the DNGS because Cons shot down his plane,” added Raf.

“I think I’ve heard of that. Isn’t it just a prototype though?” Liliy mused. “What would the Decepticons want with it?”

“I don’t have a clue. What would Starscream want with a primitive piece of tech?” wondered Ratchet.

“Yeah,” Liliy agreed in a low voice as she wandered over to her chair.

She pulled her headband down over her eyes to become a visor and she pulled her hood up so no one would notice it. Sending out a request for video feed of the Autobots, she curled up in the chair to wait.

Echo, the Communications Officer on duty, received the message. He transferred the request to the mech best suited for the job. That mech, in turn, requested a bridge to the airspace above the Autobots’ location. Not fond of flying in tight spaces, the mech transformed as soon as he entered the vortex. He ran thru and jumped out the other side. Transforming back to his vehicle mode, he hovered for a moment to gain his bearings and find the Autobots. As soon as he spotted them, he took off after them.
A message popped up on the inside of Liliy’s visor. She opened it and was pleased to see a live feed of the Autobots’ convoy.

:: The Autobots traveled along a two-lane highway thru a mountainous region, Optimus pulling a trailer in the lead. The big rig got on the tail of a slow moving old pickup. Eventually, it pulled over to let them pass. When the road began to curve and twist around the mountains, Bumblebee took the lead from Optimus. And that’s also when they picked up another tail. A military grade helicopter trailed not too far behind the convoy. It was followed by a pack of five green and black sports cars. ::

{...A whole team of Cons.} Agent Fowler’s voice filtered thru the comm link.

:: The cars caught up to the Autobots and surrounded Bulkhead. ::

“What?” asked Ratchet, staring up at the monitor. “I’m not picking up anything. They must be utilizing a cloaking technology.”

“Or they are human,” Liliy commented loudly. “I mean, not everyone on this planet is peaceful you know.”

“You could be right,” agreed Ratchet. “Optimus, there is a chance that your assailants are human since I am not receiving any Decepticon signals. Be careful.”

:: One of the cars pulled to the front to try to block Bumblebee. A second pulled alongside Optimus’ driver door. The sunroof on the car slid back and a masked man stood up to point a large gun at Prime’s window. ::

A moment later, Optimus replied. { You are correct, Ratchet. Our assailants are human, not Decepticons. }

“Nice call, Liliy,” said Miko.

:: Optimus swerved and bumped the car as they were about to shoot. The man misfired twice as the car swerved on impact. It corrected course and fell back. It went around to Prime’s other side to try again. Bumblebee dropped back and bumped them. He bumped them again and they hit a rock on the side of the road. The car flipped a few times before it landed on its roof and was left behind by the others. ::

Liliy sent Echo another message ordering him to monitor for actual Decepticon movements. Then she sent a request to Leecher to have him tail the Autobots, just in case.

Leecher complied with Liliy’s request and bridged onto the highway a few curves back so they wouldn’t be spotted. The matte black El Camino remained behind the humans’ helicopter to avoid suspicion. That’s when they took notice of a second helicopter high above road. They recognized the peach and pistachio green paint job and knew that Liliy was watching.

:: Another of the green cars pulled alongside Optimus. The passenger managed to get out and jump aboard the big rig. Prime swerved and knocked the car off the road and down a small cliff. The man was still on Optimus. Agent Fowler climbed out of Prime’s cab to nab the guy but he
ended up accidentally knocking him off so he just climbed back into the cab. ::

:: The three remaining cars stayed behind Prime with Bulkhead until the road straightened out again for a long stretch. One of the cars got close to the rear of the trailer. The passenger leaned out of the sunroof as before and fired three shots at the back. Three electro-charges embedded themselves into the lock and fried it. The lock popped open and the trailer door rolled up. As the car moved closer to the open trailer to let the passenger jump in, Arcee suddenly came flying out of the trailer in vehicle mode with her holo-driver activated. She landed on the hood of the car and bounced off. The driver swerved and the car ended up flipping on its side and rolling. The cars behind swerved to avoid it but it cost them momentum and the Autobots surged ahead with Arcee joining Bumblebee in the lead. ::

“Optimus,” Ratchet spoke into the comm as the convoy entered the mountains again. “Prepare to initiate phase two. Five miles ahead to the south you will reach the rendezvous point.”

:: As the group neared a tunnel, some railroad tracks came along and ran parallel to the road. There was a train on the tracks going in the same direction. The Autobots turned down into the rail bed and entered the train tunnel. The cars tried to follow but there was an explosion at the entrance and they had to skid to a stop to avoid being crushed by falling rocks. ::

The cars quickly got back up onto the roadway to follow thru the highway tunnel. Leecher entered behind them. They got right on their tails and transformed. They dove over them, transformed back into vehicle mode and jammed on their brakes. Being in a tunnel, the cars had nowhere to go and slammed right into the back of them. Built like a tank, Leecher suffered little damage but the cars did not fare so well. The black mech sped off, leaving the cars in a smoking wreck.

Liliy received a message from Echo. The Decepticons were on the move. Liliy relayed the message to Leecher.

:: The Autobots came out the other side of the train tunnel and returned to highway. That’s when the Cons caught up with the military helicopter. ::

“Optimus, you have company,” warned Ratchet when the Con signals appeared on his monitor.

:: The Autobots turned off the road and into a valley to avoid any humans that might appear on the highway. Six eradicons took up formation behind them. The lead one fired off four rockets. Optimus swerved sharply to dislodge his trailer and leave it behind. All four rockets slammed into the abandoned trailer and it exploded. The valley suddenly ended at a drop off. The Autobots skid to a halt at the edge. Above them, the eradicons transformed and landed on their pedes, cornering the Autobots. ::

Leecher came racing around the corner of the valley. They saw what was about to happened and patched themself into Autobots’ comm link.

“Autobots, maintain your cover! We repeat, do not transform! We'll take care of the Cons,” they ordered. “And the humans.”

{Who-} started Optimus.
“No time to explain,” Leecher snapped, cutting him off.

Leecher continued to race toward them.

“HEY!” they yelled.

The Cons turned to see the matte black car come racing in. Leecher transformed into their root mode and threw a small, round device that landed among the group. Suddenly, a ground bridge opened underneath their pedes and the eradicons fell in. Leecher ran forward and fired their blaster a few times at the circling helicopter before jumping into the portal as it closed.

Hit, the helicopter went spiraling out of the Autobots' view, but it was obvious by the lack of smoke and noise that it did not explode.

"What in the name of Uncle Sam just happened?” asked a very stunned Fowler.

"I am not sure, Agent Fowler,” answered an equally stunned Optimus even though his voice was as calm as ever. “But it seems our cover and the DNGS have been saved for the time being. We should return to base."

Pushing up her visor, Liliy smirked. Things were about to get more interesting around the Autobots. She quickly typed up a message on her phone to send to the Autobots in Leecher’s name. Then she encrypted it. She embedded the cipher in a signal and sent it and the message out to bounce off a couple of satellites before the Autobots actually received it.

The Autobots requested a ground bridge back to base. Optimus rolled to a stop, while the others transformed, and his cab door opened. And Liliy got her first look at Agent Fowler. He was a tall man, dark skinned, with black hair and sharp, brown eyes. His posture spoke military but his oversized belly said retired. And, like most government agents, he wore a suit.

"Any idea who the mysterious help was yet?” Fowler asked after Optimus transformed.

"No. The comm link has been quiet so far-" started Ratchet.

The screens started flashing, interrupting him.

"What is it?” asked Arcee.

"It appears an extremely fluctuating frequency signal…” answered Ratchet tapping away at the keys, “…with an embedded cipher? But what for?"

The computer pinged and a box saying 'You've got mail' popped up.

"Well. That's… different,” said Fowler.

Liliy couldn’t help but smirk again.

"The message is encrypted,” the medic continued after opening the message. “And the cipher appears to work for it.”

Within a few minutes, Ratchet had the human gibberish translated into Cybertronian.

"What does it say?” asked Raf.
“Autobots, We are the Cybertronian Rebel Corps,” Ratchet read aloud. "We have been watching your activities since your arrival on Earth but we apologize for not providing you with much assistance until now since we had our own problems with the Decepticons to deal with as well. Our leader hopes that we will be able to provide you with even more assistance in the future. Signed, Leecher, CRC SIC."

"SIC?" asked Miko.

"Second in command, I would assume," called Liliy from her seat.

"What's this, Prime?" demanded Fowler. "You got another civilian involved?"

"Liliy is staying with us for her protection and she hardly leaves the base," Optimus assured him. "There is no need to worry, Agent Fowler."

Unconvinced, Fowler marched up the stairs and stopped next to the chair, looking down at her with his arms crossed. "Got a last name, Liliy?"

She didn’t look up from her phone. "Scythe."

"And just where are you from, Miss Scythe?"

Again, she didn’t look up. "Canada."

"Got some identification to back that up?"

Liliy stood up. She was slightly taller than Fowler and she looked at him with a bored expression.

"Nope," she replied flatly.

Then she went to the elevator and retreated to her catwalk.

“You know I’m going to have to report this, right, Prime?” Fowler asked, turning to Optimus.

“You don’t have to,” Liliy called down.

“Uh, yes, I do. What if you go on a mission and get hurt? I going to have to report that. And have to say ‘Oh yeah, I forgot to mention the Bots have another civilian under their watch and she isn’t even a citizen of the US.’ ”

“Liliy, please work with Agent Fowler,” said Optimus, his voice a little stern.

“Hhh… Fine.” She tossed down her passport. It missed him and hit the floor near his feet. “There’s my passport. But good luck trying to find out much about me. I tend to use a lot of aliases.”

“Why? You got something to hid? How do I know that this,” he held up the passport he just picked up, “is even your real one?”

“Liliy Scythe is my real name. But my date of birth is… a little off.”

He opened it and glanced at the date. “‘A little’ being… what? A year or two?”

“Sorry. That is a secret.”

“Fine. I’ll look into this for now but you have to stay with the Bots until then, got it?”
“Whatever,” she said with a wave of her hand.

Fowler stopped by a couple days later to return Liliy’s passport. Fortunately the children were not there. And neither were their guardians.

“Everything checked out,” said Fowler as he handed Liliy the little booklet. “And I understand now why you said your birth date was off.”

“You… do?” she asked suddenly tense.

“Yes. Your records say that you were found abandoned as an infant so no one really knows the exact date of your birth.”


“You know… I could probably pull a few strings and see if I could find your birth mother at least.”

“No. That’s not necessary, Agent Fowler.”

“I also noticed in your medical records that you are listed as handicapped. Missing your left arm. Can I ask how you-”

“No!” Liliy interrupted him. She turned and walked away from him, disappearing into the depths of the base to be alone.

“Do you know how she lost her arm?” Fowler asked, looking up at Optimus who stood nearby.

“No. She only said that she lost it when she was younger and she asked us not to inquire about it further. Why do you ask?”

“Hm. Her records were pretty vague about what happened to her. She is definitely hiding something. I would keep a close eye on her if I were you, Prime.”
Liliy heard Bulkhead roll into the main room. Miko hopped out and Bulkhead transformed. They were discussing something but Liliy didn’t pay them much attention until she heard Jack cut in.

“Uh oh. What’d you do?” the boy asked.

Liliy turned in her chair to see Bulkhead go down on one knee, presumably to get closer to Miko’s level but Liliy could not see the girl from where she sat.

“Look, Miko,” Bulkhead said, “before I became a warrior, I was a laborer. Construction. I can build stuff. I can break stuff. And that’s it.”

“I love breaking stuff,” Miko replied enthusiastically. “I wanna be just like you, Bulk.”

Bulkhead vented a sigh. “Why would you wanna be like me when you could be a… a medic, like Ratchet?”

Said medic was standing in front of the main computer console.

“I’m detecting a fresh energon pulse,” he said suddenly, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. Miko and Bulkhead looked up at the monitors from the floor, while Liliy left her chair so she could see better. Ratchet continued, “From the nation called Greece. An ancient city. Quite historic, I believe.”

"Ancient Greece, huh?” Bulkhead said thoughtfully, an idea popping up in his processor. "Oooh, field trip."

“Really?” Miko squealed.

"Awesome. Can I come too?” asked Liliy.

Everyone stopped and looked at her in astonishment. It had been a few weeks since her outing to Jasper with Bumblebee and any invitations to leave the base again were met by flat refusals. Even if the party was going to walk out via the ground bridge.

"Uh…” Bulkhead glanced at Ratchet who just shrugged. “Sure, why not? Hop in.”

Bulkhead folded back up into his vehicle mode while Ratchet moved to open the ground bridge.

"Alright! Let's roll,” cried Miko as she jumped into the passenger seat.

The ground bridge spun to life as Liliy rounded Bulkhead’s tail. She hesitated at the open driver door.

“Liliy,” Ratchet spoke up behind her.

“Hm?” She turned and looked up at him.

“Do you happen to speak any Greek?”

“I know enough to get by. Why do you ask?”

“Just in case you run into any other humans over there, I trust that you will run interference better..."
than Miko will.”

“Now that I can do,” Liliy said, climbing in behind Bulkhead’s steering wheel.

Snapping his door shut, Bulkhead drove through the portal and stopped on the other side to let the girls get out before he stood up. They were on the stage of an old amphitheater. Liliy pulled out her phone and started recording video of the ruins.

"Sweet. So what are we doing in Greecoville?" asked Miko, looking around at stone remains of the once great city.

"I’m scouting energon.” Bulkhead retrieved a scanner from his subspace. “Liliy is… uh?”

"Getting ideas for my next painting," Liliy replied as she continued to take video of the ruins.

"What she said. And you're doing research for your history report.”

“You punked me, Bulk. Not cool,” grumbled Miko.

Bulkhead moved past the girls to the edge of the stage, following the beeping of the scanner. The beeping became quicker.

“Hm, signal’s strong.” He silenced the scanner. “An excavation site.”

Heavy equipment and piles of dirt surrounded a large but shallow hole in the ground where the humans had been digging for more ruins.

“Whoa.” Miko, standing beside him, seemed impressed.

“I know construction.” He looked over the area again. “According to my scanner, humans hit energon veins. And they don’t even know it. Whoa,” he said suddenly, spotting a fresco on the other side of the ruins. “That’s Cybertronian! Why would ancient Greeks paint an energon harvester?”

“You know what that round thing is?” asked Miko, pulling out her phone. She snapped a picture of the fresco and Liliy made sure to get it in her video as well. “You’re smarter than you let on.”

“But even dumber than he looks,” commented a new voice behind them.

They turned to see a burly, blue mech, about the same size as Bulkhead, only slimmer, standing at the top of the amphitheater seating area.

“Breakdown,” growled Bulkhead, recognising him.

The mech called Breakdown laughed. “Miss me?”

“Like rust in my undercarriage.”

“You know this lunk head?” asked Miko as Liliy moved to her side.

“We have a history,” replied Bulkhead.

“And you have some pets,” observed the Con, reaching for a nearby pillar. “Do they play catch?” He broke the pillar off and threw it at the girls. “Catch!”

They tried to run from the incoming pillar but luckily for them, Bulkhead got in the way and it
shattered on his armor.

“Stay down!” the wrecker ordered as the girls dropped off the edge of the stage.

Liliy shielded Miko as Breakdown slammed into Bulkhead, grabbing and lifting him as he leapt off the stage. Bulkhead hit the ground several feet below with the blue mech on top of him. Breakdown used his forward momentum to flip over the wrecker’s helm and then lift the bulkier mech over his own helm while still in the air. He launched Bulkhead across the big, open space. The Autobot crashed into the fresco. Breakdown landed on his pedes with a satisfied huff.

“Oh, hope the pretty picture wasn’t too important,” commented the blue mech before he transformed and drove off.

Bulkhead sat up amid the rubble as the girls ran over to him. “Told you I’m only good at breaking things.”

“I always have your back, Bulk,” said Miko cheerfully, pulling out her phone. “Got us a picture of the picture.” She held up her phone for him to see.

“So did I, Bulkhead. We definitely have you covered,” added Liliy, showing him the picture on her phone too.

The wrecker smiled. “Then let’s get back to base.”

Back at base, Liliy listened while the others discussed their recent find.

“It is indeed an energon harvester,” said Optimus after studying the picture. “A powerful tool created by the Ancients to remove raw energon from any source.”

“Greek gods knew Autobots?” Raf asked, confused.

“No. The Ancients often used the art of a given era to conceal messages. This fresco was likely a signpost indicating a harvester’s location, hidden somewhere on this planet.”

“Uh, Optimus, if the harvester removes energon from anything, and you all have energon pumping inside you…” Jack wanted to know.

“In Decepticon hands, the harvester would be a devastating weapon,” answered Optimus.

Liliy flinched at the thought.

“See, you were a genius to total that painting,” Miko said to Bulkhead.

“Miko’s not wrong,” commented Arcee. “How can the Cons find the harvester without the fresco?”

“With high speed internet,” stated Raf. He turned to his laptop and pulled the search engine. “If you do an image search for ‘Greek god’ and ‘golden orb’, this pops up.” He showed them the image of a statue holding a gold sphere. “It’s in a museum.”

“Is that the real deal?” Arcee asked.

Optimus studied the picture for a moment, then ordered, “Contact Agent Fowler.”
They tried and all they got was his answering machine.

“'I hate talking to machines,'” grumbled Ratchet.

“I hate to break it to you, Ratchet, but technically, you are a machine too,” commented Liliy.

He glared at her. “Fine. I hate talking to mindless machines.”

“Without Agent Fowler’s direct aid,” said Optimus, “we will have to confiscate the harvester on our own.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Confiscate? As in steal museum property?” asked Jack.

“That sounds... illegal,” added Raf.

“I do not wish to break human law,” Optimus replied, “but once the Decepticons learn of the harvester’s location, they will not hesitate to obtain it by any means necessary. We must act covertly.”

“Pssh. Yeah right. You guys and ‘covertly’ don’t belong in the same sentence,” scoffed Liliy. “Especially when a public museum in the middle of a city is involved.” She received several glares for her statement. “What? It’s true.”

“No problem,” Miko chimed in, elbowing Liliy. “We’re small enough to sneak in and we’re not a government secret.”

“Miko, I’m not sure that’s wise,” said Bulkhead.

“But it may be our best option, Bulkhead,” Optimus admitted. “The longer we debate, the more time we give the Decepticons.”

“I’m in. When do we leave?” asked Liliy.

While the Bots went off to secure the perimeter of the museum, Liliy used the computer to patch her phone into the comm link, which, oddly, Ratchet did not notice she was doing. She joined the children on the lift they prepared by the ground bridge.

{Lily, Jack, Miko, Rafael, I will have a clear view of you.} Optimus’ voice came thru the comm link. {Once you secure the harvester, I will contact Ratchet to bridge you back to base.}

“Now since you’ll bypass all points of normal entry,” Ratchet informed them, after opening the ground bridge. “You won’t need to worry about setting off the alarm. But take care to avoid any security guards.”

“Roger that,” said Liliy.

They headed into the museum via the bridge. Once they were in the museum, they looked around for the harvester. They found it in the front foyer. Optimus flashed his lights as a signal that he could see them. Liliy jumped off the lift.

“I’ll keep an eye out for the guards while you guys get the sphere.”

“Got it.”
They raised the lift and used Miko’s phone to cover the security camera. Then they rolled the lift over to the statue to get the orb. Raf climbed onto the statue’s hand to roll the orb onto the lift. They all looked up when they heard something crack. Optimus was in his bi-ped mode holding a missile that he just stopped from smashing into the building. A red sportscar Con stuck Prime with his prod and the big Bot stumbled down the steps and fell on his face in the parking lot. The Con jumped on his back and shocked him again.

“It’s Cons,” said Raf, worried.

“They got Optimus,” added Jack.

“Just get the harvester,” Liliy called up to them. “Hurry!”

But the children continued to watch the battle outside until the alarm sounded after Bulkhead and the red Con crashed into the building.

"Scrap," muttered Liliy. She pulled out her phone as the kids finally rolled the sphere onto the lift. She dialed the base. "Ratchet, the children have the harvester. They need a ground bridge stat."

{ Lily?! How did you get into the comm link? }

"Not now, Ratchet,” the woman snapped. “The alarm is going off so the guards could be here any minute and Optimus and the others are fighting Cons out front. We really need that ground bridge."

{ Alright. Fine. }

The ground bridge reopened in the hallway.

"You guys go through without me,” she told the children, handing Miko her phone that had fallen off the security camera after the lift moved away from the statue. "I'll stay behind and distract the guards so they don't see the Bots."

They nodded and disappeared through the ground bridge. Liliy took off down the hall after the portal vanished. She rounded a corner and would have ran smack into the security guard if he had not been traveling in slow motion relative to her, for she was moving faster than the human eye could comprehend. She stopped behind him and knocked him out. Catching him as he collapsed, she hefted him over her right shoulder and went looking for the security office in the back of the building.

Liliy was putting the guard on the couch in the office when she felt an all-too-familiar presence draw near. She slammed the door shut and leaned against it just as Soundwave stooped to open the big garage door of the loading bay where the office was located. However, before the mech could enter the building, he intercepted Ratchet's message to Optimus that the harvester had successfully been retrieved. Hearing him retreat, Liliy slid to the floor and clenched her fist to try and stop the trembling. After all this time, she was still not ready to face the Con who had stolen her arm.

Liliy started when her phone rang. She was still sitting on the floor in the office. It had been only been fifteen minutes but it felt like it had been hours. Thankfully, the guard was still out cold. She pulled her phone out of her pocket.

"Y-yes?" she answered, getting to her feet.

{ Lily? What happened? Where are you? } It was Miko.
"I'm still at the museum." Liliy held the phone to her ear with her shoulder and opened the door. "Why?"

{ We have been calling you and calling you. What happened? }

"I-" Liliy halted and had to push down the wave of tangled emotions that threatened to overwhelm her again at the memory of Soundwave's presence. She finally answered. "I don't remember. I guess I blacked out or something."

{ Remain there, Liliy. I will come and get you, } came Optimus' voice.

"If you don't mind, Optimus," Liliy said as she left the museum thru the loading bay. "I'd like to stay in the city for a few days, if that is alright with you. I need some time. You don't have to worry. My stuff is still there so I have to come back eventually."

There was a moment of silence while Optimus considered her request.

{ Alright, } he said finally. { You can have three days. Then I will come and get you. }

Liliy smiled. "Thank you, Optimus. Be careful, everyone. See you in three days."

She hung up the call and breathed a sigh of relief. It's not that she didn't like living with the Autobots. She did like it quite a bit. It was just that with what happened that evening at the museum, she needed a break. She needed to see her 'boys' again. They always cheered her up.

Not caring who saw, Liliy dropped her visor over her eyes and activated her emergency ground bridge protocols. She smiled as the vortex whirled to life in front of her and she took her first step toward home.
In a large cavern somewhere deep beneath the frost-bitten regions of northern Canada, there stood a Cybertronian. He was a flyer, tall and slender. Dark gray in color, almost black, with some hints of forest green mixed in. A vehicon type mask sat atop his helm as his three clawed servos tapped at the keys on the computer console before him. To his right was a darkened ground bridge. To his left, a large doorway that led to the rest of the base. And a space bridge loomed in the darkness behind him. This was the receiving room for the Cybertronian Rebel Corps’ base of operations. Everything coming or going went thru this room. This was Alfa’s domain.

Alfa stopped typing and looked up when the ground bridge activated by itself. That only happened when either the commander or the Madam activated their emergency protocols. He almost immediately assumed that it was the Madam since he knew where the commander had gone and he would have been informed if there was an actual emergency at that place. Alfa had guessed correctly when the tiny Cybertronian appeared out of the shining vortex still in her alternate mode and, even though his expression remained neutral, he was quite happy to see her.

"Hey, Alfa. I'm home." Liliy waved at the base's foremost bridge operator and her third-in-command.

"Welcome back, Madam," the dark gray mech greeted with a slight bow. "How long will you be staying this time?"

Liliy's comings and goings were a regular thing so he assumed she probably would not be staying for long.

"Three days," she answered. "Is Leecher here?"

"No," Alfa replied, checking his chronometer. "They are working a late shift today so they are still at the mine. Shall I send for them?"

"Nah. Just tell them I'm here when they return, ok?"

"As you wish." He bowed slightly again and returned to typing away on the keyboard.

Liliy smiled as she left the receiving room and entered the main hall of the CRC base. While the receiving room was a natural cavern, the rest of the base starting with the main hall had been dug out and lined with metal. It was like stepping off Earth and onto a Cybertronian ship. The hall was a big, long room with several smaller rooms and hallways branching off it. At the far end was the doorway to the rec room. The Communications center was on the right upon entering the hall. A sleek flyer, black with flecks of pale gold, stood in the doorway listening to a shorter, boxy grounder of red and white who leaned against the door frame. Both had vehicon masks on top of their helms.

"Hello, Echo, Foxtrot," Liliy greeted them.
"Madam! You’re back!" Foxtrot, the grounder, cried happily, pushing off the door frame to stand up straight.

"How did you get the Autobots to let you out of their sight?" asked Echo, one optic ridge raised.

"I just asked permission."

"Our proud leader?" Foxtrot sounded skeptical. "Ask for permission?"

"Oh, hush, Foxtrot," she said, waving him off. "Go find Delta and prepare the lab for me to maintenance those troops Leecher brought in a few days ago. I'll be in the medbay for a bit."

"Yes ma'am!" He saluted and ran off.

As Liliy turned to go to the medbay, Echo’s concerned voice stopped her.

“Madam, did something happen?"

She kept her back to him. “Nothing much. Why do you ask?"

“Because you seem… tense.” As he spoke he stepped toward her and went down on one knee. He reached out and ever so gently turned her around to face him. “Does it have to do with what happened tonight? The Decepticons showing up at the museum? I saw that Soundwave got pretty close…” He trailed off when he saw Liliy flinch and her right hand instinctively went to her left shoulder. “Oh. Madam, I am sorry.”

Liliy shook her head. “Don’t be, Echo. To be honest, yes. I came back tonight because of that. It scared me so bad I was shaking. I came back because… Because every time I see you guys, from Romeo’s confident yet sometimes goofy smirk to Alfa’s ever stoic expression, I know that everything is going to be alright. That I am not alone anymore.”

Echo suddenly scooped Liliy up so she was sitting on his palms and lifted her up until his forehelm touched her forehead. As he moved her back, she observed that his optics shone little brighter and the corners of his mouth turned upward in a rare smile.

“I am sure I speak for us all when I say that we will always do our best to be there for you, Madam. As you have been for us.”

Liliy smiled. This is what she came back for. “Thank you very much, Echo.”

Finally in the medbay, Liliy frowned at the scan of her shoulder on the small monitor before her. She had known some damage had been done when she was very nearly crushed by Optimus, but now she knew how bad it was. The big mech had fallen over on top of her. If it hadn’t been for her lightning fast reflexes and the stacks on his back, she would have been crushed flat. Still, her left shoulder had been caught under his armor plating, bending and smashing her own plates to the point where they nearly threatened to sever an important energon line and also trapping her in her alt-mode until they could be fixed. No one noticed because her alt-mode’s holoform exterior.

Sensing someone in the hall, she quickly erased the image and went over to her personal energon transfusion module. Leecher entered the medbay while she was hooking herself up.

"Seriously, Lil’?" Being her second-in-command and the mech who has known her since before they formed the CRC, Leecher was the only one who called her by her name. "What were you
thinking telling the Autobots about the CRC?"

Liliy rolled her eyes. "It's not like I told them directly."

"But now they know about us!"

"It gets worse," she continued in mock seriousness.

"What?"

"I told Special Agent Fowler, their government liaison, that my last name is Scythe. And I'm from Canada." She appeared calm but she was secretly amused at his anger.

"In front of the Autobots?" They were incredulous.

"In front of the Autobots."

"LILY!" they practically shouted in annoyance.

The machine beeped its finish. Liliy began to unhook the tubes from her side.

"It will be fine, Leech." Her amusement starting to trickle into her voice. "The Autobots aren't that bad. Besides Prime technically already knows about us, remember? And I think you missed the part about the government liaison."

"The Prime might know but he doesn't remember. And what does the liaison have to do with anything?"

"That means someone from the US government is now aware of our presence. Let's hope it doesn't bring us trouble."

"We've been in tight spots before," Leecher grumbled.

"So true. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have six mechs to maintenance and less than 72 hours to do it. I'll be in the lab with Delta and Fox if you need me." And she left them in the medbay.

Liliy knew she should have told Leech about her injury and let them fix it but it would have taken time she didn't have. Maybe she could sneak out of the Autobot base later.

All of Liliy's 'boys', as she loved to call them, were happy to hear that their leader had returned but they were disappointed to hear that she would only be staying for three days. They all knew about the newest batch of eradicons and they also knew that maintaining just one could easily take up to 12 hours or more. Every time they passed the lab door that had been locked almost since her arrival, they would sigh and move on.

On the last day of Liliy’s stay, Lima was on comm duty. The little, lime green femme stepped out of the Comm center for a moment and looked around the main hall.

"Hey, Commander," she called, spotting the Leecher. "Can you come here for a minute?"

"Sure, Lima." They crossed the hall and entered the Comm center. "What seems to be the problem?"
“I don’t know if it is going to be a problem or not,” Lima said, returning to her station, "but the Madam said to be on the lookout for any Cons getting near Jasper, Nevada. Well, Knock Out is on his way there now.”

Leecher looked up at the monitors. There was a map of Jasper and the surrounding area. A little red Decepticon symbol, labeled Knock Out, blinked along one of the roads leading to the small town.

“Should we send someone to keep an eye on him?” Lima wanted to know.

“I’ll go,” offered a voice from the doorway.

They turned to find Tango standing there.

“You?” Leecher sounded surprised.

“Romeo is in recharge right now and you need someone fast to keep up with Knock Out. Unless you want to send one of the flyers.”

“No, you can go. We just wasn’t expecting you to volunteer for a mission.”

“Sometimes, everyone needs to get a breath of fresh air, right?”

“Or a chance to skip out on mining duty,” added Lima snidely. Tango just shrugged.

“Right. We’ll inform Liliy later,” said Leecher. “You can go, Tango.”

Tango bridged to the highway outside of Jasper. The sun was just setting. He headed into town and pulled over a block from where Knock Out’s signal sat. He sat there for about a hour. By then, it was totally dark. Then Tango followed him to the other edge of town. Another signal popped up on the Audi’s radar as they neared one of the dry canals.

“Is that who I think it it?” he asked his comm.

{Yes. That would be Honey.} came Lima’s answer. They used codenames for the Bots and Cons over the comms just in the off chance someone else was listening.

“Great. A Bot and a Con together with a bunch humans around. What could possibly go wrong?”

{Stay close to them. Interfere at your own discretion.} Leecher ordered.

“Roger that.”

Tango joined the race lineup behind Knock Out.

“Make it mean but keep it clean,” the announcer said.

The young female human signaled the start and the cars took off.

Bumblebee and a black car with flame decals fought for the lead at first but Bumblebee was able to pull ahead. Knock Out pulled alongside the black car and bumped it. The driver fought to control his car and Tango had to swerve to avoid him. Bumblebee took notice of Knock Out’s actions and sped up. Knock Out and Tango quickly gave chase. Bumblebee swerved up onto the slanted canal wall to take the next turn easier at high speeds. Knock Out followed him, activating his blasters.
that popped out of his rear fenders. Tango floored his accelerator and swerved up into Knock Out just as the Con fired his blasters. The Audi grunted as the shot left a scorch mark across his door but he continued to turn his wheels, forcing the Ashton Martin up and over the edge of the canal. Bumblebee left them behind as they skid to a stop in the dust, nearly facing each other.

Knock Out just sat stunned for a full minute, trying comprehend what had happened. Tango’s only movement was his side mirror twisting to examine the damage to his orange and silver paint job. The Con’s engine revved angrily.

“Who in the Pit are you?” Knock Out growled.

“I’ve heard that you are an automobile enthusiast,” Tango replied nonchalantly. “What do you think of my alt?”

“Hmm…” Intrigued, Knock Out slowly drove in a circle around the Audi. “Not bad. Sleek design. Definitely built for speed. And I think your paint job looks better with the scorch mark.”

Tango snorted. “Of course you’d say that.”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

“Beat me in a race and I’ll tell you.”

Knock Out stared at him for a long moment. “Alright.”

“Great. First one to these coordinates,” Tango transmitted the location to the Con, “wins.”

“Go!” Tires spinning on the loose dirt, Knock Out twisted around, smacking Tango’s nose with his rear end as he did.

“Hey!” Tango yelled as he shifted into gear and sped after him.

The coordinates were an intersection. Tango was the first to pass thru it with a triumphant toot of his horn. He skid to a halt on the other side. Knock Out slammed on his brakes and transformed in the intersection.

“You cheated!”

“I cheated?” Tango stayed in his alt-mode. “You shot me twice in the aft and cracked my headlight when you smacked me at the start. And you claim that I cheated?”

“A lot of good it did me,” Knock Out muttered. Louder, he asked, “So what do you want from me, Autobot?”

Tango transformed to his pedes so fast it startled Knock Out. He advanced on him with a piercing glare.

“Let’s get one thing straight, Decepticon!” They were chestplate to chestplate. “I. Am not. An Autobot!”

Tango was basically the same height as Knock Out, maybe a smidge shorter. The doorwings on his back flared wide to make him look bigger. But thing that caught Knock Out’s attention most was the mask hanging lopsided off the top of the orange mech’s helm.

“You’re a vehicon?” Knock Out asked, taking a step back, shocked.
“Was,” corrected Tango. “I was a vehicon. Until I was saved by a Neutral and asked to join them.”

“Was a vehicon? But… that’s not…” He noticed that the bright orange mech was still glaring at him. “Do you intend to fight me?”

“No.” His gaze softened slightly. “My mission is already complete.”

“Mission?”

“Yes. All I was supposed to do was keep you from hurting anyone and I did just that.”

“Except I hurt you.”

“Nothing permanent and it’s mostly cosmetic. Anyway, since my job is done, I should probably be going now.”

“I still want to know your name. You are… interesting.”

Before Tango could respond, Knock Out’s comm beeped.

“Maybe some other time,” Tango replied with a smirk. Then he transformed and sped away.

Knock Out stared after him until his comm beeped again. He grumbled before answering with a sharp ‘What?’. It was Breakdown advising him to get back to the Nemesis and Starscream could be heard yelling angrily in the background. The red mech sighed.

“Very well. Send me a ground bridge.”

In the lab back at the CRC base, things were getting finished up.

"There. That should do it," Liliy said, tapping one final key. She checked her choronmeter. "You two can take care of the paint jobs later, right?"

"Yes, ma'am. That's the easy part," replied Delta, her chief lab assistant.

"But it takes the longest," grumbled Foxtrot. Delta elbowed his red and white companion. Foxtrot glared up at the slightly taller, white and blue mech before adding, “But we will do it.”

"Good,” Liliy said with a smile. “Now, I know the guys just went off to the mine a couple hours ago but what do you say we call them back and have a party?"

"I'd say, you're on!" cheered Foxtrot as he hurried toward the door.

"Absolutely,” added Delta. He offered the small femme his servo. “Madam?"

Liliy’s smile got bigger as she stepped onto the waiting servo with a nod. The mech smiled as well as he left the room carrying her. Parties were the best part of Liliy’s homecoming.

In the hall outside the lab, Foxtrot ran into Tango who was on his way to the medbay. He excitedly grabbed Tango by the shoulders and shook him.

“Guess what, Tango? Party time!” the Jeep crowed before taking off down the hallway again.
Tango turned to watch him go with a smile and missed Delta exiting the lab with Liliy.

“Tango, what happened to your door wing?” the femme asked, concerned.

In spite of himself, Tango flinched slightly at the question. Before he could turn to address her, Delta was right beside him and he could feel a small hand gently touching the sensitive panel. The doorwing twitched under Liliy’s touch.

“This is a blaster mark. Tango, what did you do?”

“Commander Leecher was supposed to inform you of my mission but I guess they didn’t have time before they left for the mines.” He turned to face her and Delta. “Knock Out showed up in Jasper and I had to head him off when he tried to attack Bumblebee during a human street race.”

Liliy raised an eyebrow. “Is that so? Delta, do you mind starting the party without me? Tango needs a quick wash and wax.”

“Certainly, ma’am.” The tow truck transferred the femme to Tango and went to find Foxtrot.

“To the washracks, Tango. I haven’t noticed any injures to warrant a visit to the medbay yet.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

In the washracks, Liliy had Tango transform down to his alt-mode so she could reach better. She tried her hardest not to laugh at the two scorch marks on his rear end but she immediately sobered up when she noticed the cracked headlight.

“Seems like you had quite an adventure,” she said as she poured warm soapy water over him and started scrubbing. “How much does he know?”

“That I’m not an Autobot. That I used to be a vehicon but I joined a Neutral. That’s it.”

“You didn’t tell him your name?”

“No. He lost the race so I didn’t have to tell him.”

“Did he seem interested in you?”

“A little.”

“Just remember he is still a Decepticon.”

“I know.”

Clean and freshly waxed, Tango entered the rec room with Liliy sitting on his shoulder. Upbeat music pulsed from the sound system. There was a video game tournament going on the huge monitor on the back wall. And everyone had a cube of high grade.

“Heey! There they are!” shouted Foxtrot, spotting them.

“Madam!” several voices cried happily.

The little femme smiled as she looked over the group. She caught Echo’s optic and nodded. Yes, everything was going to be alright.
Some time later, Liliy waited near the entrance to the museum parking lot. It was closed due to a ‘sudden need’ for renovations. She waited for two hours. No one showed so she called the Autobot base.

"Hey. Did you guys forget about me?" she asked when Ratchet answered.

There was a moment of silence.

{I'm sorry, Liliy. I will be right there,} said Prime.

{Why don't I just bridge her back? Liliy, go find a secluded alley.} Ratchet suggested.

"Found one. Do you have my coordinates?"

Her answer was a ground bridge opening. She passed through it and smiled up at the big mechs.

"I'm back."
“Optimus, you’re not going to believe this.”

Liliy looked as curious as everyone else at what Ratchet found.

“I just pinpointed the location of the Decepticon warship.”

Glancing at the monitors, Liliy grabbed her phone to confirm the coordinates with her base.

“How did you penetrate their cloaking technology?” asked Optimus.

“I didn’t. I was experimenting with variable frequency wavelengths when I stumbled upon it,” Ratchet explained. “Even still, their ship must be experiencing some kind of electromagnetic breach.”

“With Megatron deceased and the element of surprise-” started Arcee, smashed her fist into her other palm.

Liliy paused in the middle of typing a message on her phone. For a moment she forgot that the Autobots did not have the same advanced Cybertronian tech that the CRC did that allowed them to track every spark on and around the planet. She knew that Megatron was, in fact, alive, albeit barely, and she almost corrected Arcee. But then she remembered that she had a cover to keep and she went back to typing.

“-We could cause some serious damage,” finished Bulkhead.

The computer beeped and another signal indicator showed up.

“Also on the same frequency,” Ratchet informed them, ”an Autobot emergency beacon.”

Liliy frowned as she looked up at the monitor. She found it odd that this was the first she heard of the Autobot ship. But if Echo had not located it before, there was either no one on broad or they were all dead. Noting the location coordinates, she knew that the ship was in a desert where the sand dunes were often shifting. The ship was probably resurfacing after being buried for who knows how long.

“The Decepticons can wait,” said Optimus, making a decision. “There may be Autobots in distress. Ratchet, bring your medical kit.”

Doubting they would find anyone, Liliy watched Prime and Ratchet bridge off to the Autobot crash site while she waited for a reply from her base. A few minutes later her phone pinged. Echo confirmed that the Cons’ warship location was correct and that they were indeed experiencing a leak according to a report from Ucon.

{We need a ground bridge. Now! } Ratchet’s urgent voice suddenly sounded thru the comms.

Arcee all but slammed the lever down in her haste to reopen the ground bridge. The portal whirled to life and Optimus appeared with Ratchet helping him along.

“Ratchet, what happened?” asked Bulkhead.

“Quickly. Help me get him to a med berth,” Ratchet ordered.
Bulkhead grabbed Optimus’ other arm as the larger bot stumbled and almost took Ratchet down with him. They helped him to a med berth and carefully laid him down. Bulkhead stepped back to let Ratchet work as the medic pulled out a scanner.

Liliy hurried up to the catwalk over the medbay with the children to get a better view while the other Bots hung back a respectful distance. From the catwalk, Liliy could see that Optimus’ right optic flickered and the faceplates around it were turning black and brown with rust.

“Cybonic plague,” Ratchet confirmed, finishing up his scans. The Bots looked at each other in dismay. “It’s only contagious if contact is made with the infected energon.”

“What was a plague doing in an Autobot spaceship?” Miko asked, concerned.

“It’s passengers were infected,” answered Arcee. “The virus wiped millions on Cybertron during the great war.”

Having left Cybertron near the beginning of the war, Liliy didn't know much about the Cybonic plague except for what she read in the archives she got from downed ships in the past. This was the first time she had encountered it in real life.

“Cybonic Plague was engineered in the Decepticons’ biological warfare program,” explained Ratchet, “by Megatron himself.”

“You… have a cure, don’t you?” asked Raf.

It was Optimus who answered.

“No cure,” he said weakly.

Ratchet turned to him. “Optimus, please. Save your strength.”

“Would Megatron create a disease without having a cure? I mean what if he caught it by accident?” Liliy smiled inwardly at Jack’s question. Humans never ceased to amaze her.

“It’s not like we can ask Megatron, Jack,” said Bulkhead. “He’s pushing up lugnuts.”

Liliy rolled her eyes. The Bots were in for a big surprise.

“But,” mused Ratchet, “we might be able to access the Decepticon database. For the moment, we still have a fix on their warship’s location.” He gestured at the nearest monitor.

“Bumblebee, come with,” Arcee commanded as she moved toward the ground bridge.

“Acree, quickly,” Ratchet urged.

After the pair left, Liliy pulled out her phone and searched through her own base's files for a possible clue. She was starting to get a little anxious, knowing she had medical knowledge but there was nothing she could do to help. On the warship, Acree wasn’t having much more luck than Liliy. She and Ratchet were arguing over the comm about how to search the database. Then Bumblebee got Arcee’s attention.

“What is it? What’s going on?” Ratchet asked after there was nearly a full minute of silence.

{It’s… Megatron… He’s alive…}
There was a collective gasp from Bulkhead and the children. Liliy just smirked in an ‘i told you so’ way.

“What?!” Jack gasped louder than the others.

“T-that’s not possible!” insisted Ratchet.

{Well, I’m staring right at him. Good news is, Megatron isn’t exactly staring back.}

“Megatron?” asked Optimus, his voice weaker than before.

{He's critical. Hooked up to life support. Time to finish this once and for all.}

“Wait!” Ratchet exclaimed, startling everyone. “Don’t!”

{One good reason. Fast.}

“Megatron may be Optimus’ only hope for survival.”

{What are you talking about?}

“Does he display brainwave activity?”

Liliy was starting to see where the medic was going with his inquiry.

{Spiking hard. His sick mind still at work.}

“Perfect! If a cure exists, Megatron maybe the only one who knows it. You must enter his brain. And find it.”

{Enter Megatron’s brain? Ratchet, are you out of your fragging mind?}

“The Decepticon laboratory should contain all the equipment you need for a cortical psychic patch.”

{No way! Have you ever even performed the procedure?}

“No,” Ratchet replied honestly. “But I have thoroughly studied the theoretical literature. Invented by Decepticons. Outlawed by Autobots.”

{Whoa! Can’t we just haul Megatron thru the ground bridge? Buy us some time to figure this out?}

“Time is one thing that Optimus does not have! One of you must try this! I will not allow Optimus to pass knowing that Megatron will outlive him!”

{Ratchet, I would lay down my life for Optimus! Anytime! Anywhere! But a mind body split-}

{I will do it.} Bumblebee interrupted.

{You will?}

“Are you sure, Bumblebee?” asked Raf.
“Bee’s the best scout there is,” Bulkhead reassured him.

Ratchet walked Arcee thru what equipment she would need and how to attach it between the two mechs.

{Ratchet, we’re ready.}

“Initiate cortical psychic patch.” Ratchet brought up a video feed on the monitor. “Communications downlink activated. This will allow us to see and hear everything Bumblebee does while within Megatron’s subconscious mind.”

“Whoa. Where’s that?” asked Jack, leaning a little over the rail to get a better look.

“Bee says it looks like Kaon,” Raf translated the scout’s beeps for the older boy. “The Decepticon capital back on Cybertron.”

Bulkhead checked on Optimus while Ratchet monitored Bumblebee's progress.

“Ratch, Optimus’ vitals.”

“I know,” the medic replied quietly. He opened a comm to Bumblebee. “Quickly, Bumblebee. I know you’re unknown territory but you must figure out where information might be filed in Megatron’s mind.”

The first person Bumblebee came across was Optimus. He ran up to him.

“Bumblebee, that is not Optimus,” Ratchet informed the scout, “but a figment of Megatron’s mind. It cannot see or hear you.”

A sinister laugh filtered through Bumblebee’s comm. Liliy heard a faint crack and flinched. She looked down at the phone in her hand. Cracks radiated out from where her thumb smashed the screen. Megatron’s voice continued to come through the commlink but Liliy could not make out what he was saying. Instead she was haunted by long suppressed memories. She shook her head to try and get rid of them as she stepped away from the children. They didn’t seem to notice her movements. They were too involved with what was going on below them. Liliy focused on the monitor in front of Ratchet. Megatron attacked the Optimus look-a-like and it vanished into dust.

“That never happened,” commented Bulkhead.

“It’s not a memory,” Ratchet explained. “We’re seeing Kaon as Megatron has recreated it, in his darkest dreams.”

Liliy was at the bottom of the catwalk’s ladder before Ratchet finished speaking. She was definitely worried about Optimus’ condition but she didn’t want to see or hear the Decepticon warlord anymore so she disappeared down the hallway next to the medbay.

As Liliy ventured farther down the hallway, her vision darkened and then she saw a very different hallway. One on a planet hundreds of lightyears away. Figures appeared in front of her, behind her, beside her. They were her friends, her comrades, and her clansmen. They were the ones she would have called family if she had known the term back then. Megatron appeared beyond them, tall and menacing. He raised his arm, his blaster charging. Liliy ran forward through her clansmen to try and stop him.

“No!” The word was barely out of her vocalizer when he fired. Liliy stopped short and turned. Her clansmen all lay dead on the floor. Megatron smirked as one of the half burnt corpses twitched and
slowly began to rise. More followed until they were all on their pedes again. Liliy took a step back as all their lifeless optics turned to her.

“Why?” one asked suddenly.

“What?” she hesitated.

“Why you?”

“Why us?”

They started to crowd toward her, demanding answers.

“How could you fail us?”

“How could you?”

She backed away.

“I didn’t… I wasn’t my fault…”

Liliy spun around and ran. The corpses followed after her, still demanding to know why she failed; why they had to pay for her failure. She could hear Megatron laughing in the background. Turning a corner, she found herself at a dead end. A blackened servo caught her shoulder. On instinct, the panels on her forearm opened and a thing like a rod about the length of her hand came out and found its way to her palm. As her fingers curled around it, it transformed out to a staff about seven feet in length. A faint hum filled the air as the red blade activated. It was a shaped laser, large and curved to represent her namesake: the Scythe.

“Enough!” Liliy cried, violently twisting around and slashing at the corpses. “Get away from me!”

The corpses screamed and dissolved into dust. And so did the dark hallway. Venting heavily, Liliy found herself in one of the small offices in the back of the base. A black slash mark burned into the wall and empty bookcase in front of her. There was a slight creak and the top of the bookcase slid off and crashed to the floor at her feet. Liliy looked down at her hand, completely unsettled. She deactivated the laser blade and transformed the staff back into her forearm. She backed up until she bumped into the wall behind her and then slid down into sitting position, still staring blankly at the ruined wall.

It had been a very long time since she had an episode like that. Dark visions like that had plagued her often after she was forced to flee Cybertron. They became less frequent after she came to Earth and started the CRC. And then one day, they just stopped.

Seeing and hearing Megatron again was obviously the trigger for this one. If the visions were going to start again, Liliy would have to leave the Autobots. She did not want to put the children in danger. They were more vulnerable than the Bots but that didn’t mean she couldn’t hurt the Bots too. She was still so scared that she almost reactivated her blade when her phone started ringing.

“Leech…” she whispered after she managed to pull the cracked but still working phone out and answer the call.

{Liliy! What happened? What’s wrong?} They sounded worried. They probably sensed that something was off with her. They usually did.

“I just… just had a-” Her vocalizer hitched. She reset it. “Leech… I’m scared.”
"...You had a vision again, didn’t you?" They easily guessed what she was trying to tell them. They were the one who always helped her deal with them in the past. {What triggered it? Do you know?}

“Megatron...” Her voice was so quiet, she wondered if they heard it.

{I see...} Apparently they had. {So the Autobots know he’s alive then?}

“Yes.”

{If he survives, it could be dangerous for you to stay there. Especially if you start having visions again.}

“I know...”

{Do you want to come home now?}

“No... They’ll worry about me if I suddenly disappear. I will stay for a little while longer to see how things turn out.”

{Very well. But if you have another vision, you’re coming home right away. Understood?}

“Yes.”

{Is there anything else you want to talk about?}

Before Liliy could answer, her sensors picked up the ground bridge activating.

“No. I think the Bots are back. I want to check on OP.”

{What wrong with him?}

“He was infected with Cybonic plague when they went to check out that Autobot shipwreck. Apparently, all the passengers died of it so I suggest that it be destroyed. From the air, if possible. I don’t want any of the 'boys' going near it. I'll send you the coordinates.”

{I'll see that it is done.}

“Hopefully the Bots were able to get the cure off the Nemesis. I will definitely get a copy for us if they did.”

{Alright. Liliy, take care of yourself. Call if you need anything.}

“You know I try, Leech. You do the same.”

Liliy ended the call and bowed her head. She was still shaken from the vision but she felt a little better after talking to Leecher. After a moment she tried to stand up but her legs didn't want to hold her up and she collapsed back against the wall. Sighing, she looked up at the ceiling and tried to think of nothing. Five minutes later, her eyelids closed and her head rolled to the side and then she suddenly jerked upright.

“Now’s not the time to be falling asleep,” she chided herself quietly.

Liliy tried to stand up again and she made it to her feet but she had to keep her hand on the wall to keep for teetering. She left the room and made her way slowly back to the command center. She
heard human footsteps ahead of her, around the corner and getting closer, so she leaned her back against the wall and tried to act casual. Miko came running around the corner and spotted her.

“Lily! There you are!” she called.

“Miko. What happened? Are Arcee and Bumblebee back?”

“Yes. Bee was able to get the cure. Ratchet is working on it right now.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Are you ok, Lily? You left in kind of a rush after Megatron showed up.”

Lily stared at the girl in surprise. She didn’t think that anyone had seen her leave. She looked down at her feet.

“His voice reminded me of some bad memories that I would rather forever forget.”

Lily unconsciously covered her left shoulder with her right hand. Miko noticed the action and knew better than to ask about it.

“Oh,” she said instead. “Well, uh, Ratchet says Optimus is going to be okay. He just needs to rest after he gets the cure. Do you want to go see him?”

“I will in a little while. Thank you for telling me, Miko.”

“No problem.” The girl turned and ran off, back the way she came. Lily slid to the floor, feeling as if some weight had been lifted off her. Optimus was going to be okay.
The cure took some time to work but, by the time the children were back from school the next evening, Ratchet finally allowed Optimus to get up from the med breth. Everyone gathered near the medbay, except Liliy who was sitting on the stairs watching with a smile, and cheered and clapped happily as Ratchet pulled the taller mech to his pedes and helped him stand upright.

“Please,” said Optimus, still leaning on Ratchet a little. “Reserve the hero’s welcome for my physician.” Ratchet smiled up at him. “And my scout.” He gestured to Bumblebee.

The gang turned to look at Bumblebee, still clapping. Buzzing, he rubbed the back of his helm, a little embarrassed by the attention.

“Way to go, Bee,” cheered Raf.

Bumblebee took a bow. As he straightened up, there was a hitch in his movement and he stood frozen for a few seconds. No one seemed to notice but Liliy who frowned at the way Bumblebee stared straight ahead at nothing. She was not sure why but she had a bad feeling that patch may have had a negative effect on the scout. Then Bumblebee shook his helm and bowed again.

“Well then,” said Ratchet. “I hate to break up the celebration but it’s time for you children to go home.”

“What?” whined Miko. “Why? We haven’t gotten to play yet.”

“Because it is getting late and Optimus need some more rest. You can play tomorrow.”

“Fine. Come on, Bulk.”

The guardians transformed to take their charges home.

The next day, Liliy hung out on the first tier next to the medbay while Ratchet performed a check-up on Optimus. She was interested in the Prime’s condition but her real reason for being there was to keep an eye on Bumblebee who stood nearby with Arcee.

“I wouldn’t advise anything strenuous, Optimus,” Ratchet commented as he finished the check-up, “but it appears that your systems have fully recovered from the Cybonic Plague.”

“Thanks to your medical expertise, old friend,” Optimus stated as he stepped out of the medbay’s containment area.

“It was your scout who braved unknown territory to locate the cure,” countered Ratchet, turning to look at Bumblebee.

“No. No. I’m not that great,” he beeped, waving his servos frantically.

“Lucky for us Megatron was still alive,” said Arcee.

“Did you serious just say that?”

“Yeah. I actually said that.”
“What matters is that you are on the mend, Optimus.” Ratchet looked up at the taller mech. “While Megatron-”

“We really don’t know what happened to him.”

“He’s right,” added Arcee. “I did my best to finish Megatron’s story. Just couldn’t stick around long enough to see how it ended.”

While Arcee was speaking, Liliy again witnessed a hitch in Bumblebee’s movements and his optic irises narrowed. Then he suddenly turned and walked into the hallway, his posture oddly stiff. Liliy, curious, quickly followed after him. He stopped a little ways down the hall. He examined his servos, flexing his digits as if he was testing them.

“Bee?” Liliy asked softly as she came around to his front.

He did not appear to hear her. Instead he stared straight ahead with dark, angry glare. This uncharacteristic, unseeing gaze startled Liliy. She carefully approached his ped.

“Bumblebee?” she inquired a little louder this time as she reached out and touched the metal on his ankle.

Bumblebee jerked slightly and looked down at her with a surprised yet clear expression.

“Are you ok, Bee?”

“Of course,” he chirped, giving her a thumbs up and then continuing down the hall.

Liliy watched him go, not at all convinced that he was.

The next time Bumblebee spaced out was that afternoon when the children came to play. Bulkhead and Bumblebee were playing a game of ‘basketball by way of Cybertron’ as Miko called it. Bulkhead had just made a basket so he passed the ball, made out of scrap metal, to Bumblebee.

“Come on, best two out of three,” the Wrecker said.

Bumblebee caught the ball and moved toward the hoop. He dodged around Bulkhead who was trying to block him.

“Bee,” cheered Raf. “You’re in the clear. Dunk it, Bee.”

But Bumblebee just slowed to a stop in front of the hoop and his expression went blank.

“Bumblebee,” Bulkhead said after the scout was still for a few seconds. “Quit hogging the ball.”

No one but Liliy was quick enough to notice the angry glare on Bumblebee’s face as he suddenly spun and launched the ball at Bulkhead’s helm. Quicker than his frame led one to believe it was, Bulkhead ducked and the ball crashed into the rock wall behind him.


“Dodgeball by way of Cybertron,” suggested Jack.

“Bee,” Bulkhead corrected the suddenly confused scout. “Hoop’s over there.”
He pointed at the big metal ring attached perpendicular to a metal backboard on the catwalk.

“*I’m really sorry, Bulkhead. I don’t know what came over me.*”

“Bee, you ok?” asked Raf.

“*I’m fine. Let’s go again.*” He held up three digits.

“Yeah,” agreed Raf, though he wasn’t totally convinced. “Three out of five.”

The game finished without another hitch. Bumblebee beat Bulkhead; five games out of seven.

The next morning, Liliy’s phone started ringing, waking her up. She rolled over and picked it up, frowning at the display before answering.

“Raf? Is something wrong? Shouldn’t you be at school right now?”

*Bumblebee never came to pick me up. And his commlink’s off again. Is he there at the base?*

“I haven’t seen him but let me go down and check the back rooms.”

Liliy got up from her sleeping bag and went to the elevator.

“Hey, Raf. Has Bee been acting weird lately or is this the first time?”

*Now that you mention it… Yes, he has. Yesterday, when he picked me up from school, he just kinda sat there until I asked what was wrong. He said it was nothing and drove to the base like normal. But then he threw that ball at Bulkhead.*

“Yeah. I saw that. A couple of times before that I saw him space out. He has definitely been acting a little weird since-” Liliy stepped out of the elevator and spotted Bumblebee.

He was over by the medbay. He stopped to look at something on Ratchet’s workbench, when his frame jerked slightly before it stiffened. His optics narrowed. Stepping toward the workbench, he reached out and picked up a tool that was sitting there. He held it for a second before he suddenly crushed it in his fist while glaring harshly at nothing.

Liliy just stared, open-mouthed, not hearing Raf asking her what was wrong thru her phone.

“Bumblebee!” Ratchet’s voice exclaimed from the hallway entrance behind the scout.

Bumblebee’s optics widened in surprise and he turned to the medic.

“I needed that!” Ratchet cried upon seeing the broken tool.

*Whoops,* beeped Bumblebee, looking down at the tool.

“What has gotten into you?”

“I don’t know. I keep seeing visions of Megatron’s face inside my head.”

“You’re seeing Megatron’s face?” Ratchet sounded concerned.
“Raf,” Liliy said suddenly, drawing the attention of the two Bots. “I found Bee. He’s here at the base. How would you feel about skipping school today? I think Bee could really use your support right now.”

{Is something wrong?}

“We don’t know yet. I can send you a bridge if you want.”

“Liliy, school is—” Ratchet stopped speaking when Liliy shot him a glare. He waved it off and turned his attention to Bumblebee.

{If Bee needs me, I’ll come.}

“Thanks, Raf. I’ll send you that bridge right now.”

Liliy hung up and hurried over to the computer. She punched in the coordinates of Raf’s phone and opened the ground bridge. Raf appeared in the portal. But before he could ask what was wrong, Optimus, Arcee, and Bulkhead rolled in and transformed.

“Rafael,” Optimus inquired upon seeing the boy. “Shouldn’t you be at school?”

“Bumblebee never picked me up for school. And when I call Liliy looking for him, she said he was here and something might be wrong with him so she bridged me over.”

Optimus looked up at Liliy in surprise.

“Ask Ratchet,” Liliy informed him. “He already started an examination.”

Ratchet was in the medbay, having Bumblebee step into the containment area. Optimus moved over to the medbay. Raf followed, running to keep up with him.

“Ratchet, is something wrong Bumblebee?” Optimus asked.

“Bumblebee’s complaining of intermittent visions,” explained Ratchet as he had Bumblebee power down. “Waking nightmares if you will. Ever since he and Arcee came back from the Nemesis.”

“But you said Bee was fine when you checked him over,” said Raf. The boy stood at Bumblebee’s pedes. Liliy came over and stood next to him, resting a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“Physically,” replied Ratchet. “But the experience he endured seems to be having a temporary effect on his psyche.”

“That kind of explains his odd behavior lately,” said Liliy.

“This induced power-down,” continued Ratchet, “should force Bumblebee’s mind to rest and recover.”

The base commlink beeped. Ratchet answered it on the monitor in the medbay. Agent Fowler appeared on the screen. Everyone gathered around to listen.

{Prime. You spot any Decepticons wearing hula skirts lately?}

Liliy actually chuckled aloud at the mental image.

“No, Special Agent Fowler,” answered Optimus. “Why?”
Cause I was hoping you had a lead on the Cons that busted into the Kauai Naval Observatory. Place looked like it was hit by an army of wrecking balls.

"Why would Cons break into an observatory?" asked Arcee.

Does the Heuck Nigoghossian ring any bells?

"The space telescope," answered Raf, who stood between Liliy and Optimus.

As of last night missing its primary lens.

"It’s difficult to guess Starscream’s intent without knowing where the lens has been taken," said Prime.

"Doesn’t something like that have a tracking device just in case it does get stolen?" asked Liliy.

Yes, it does. I have already acquired the frequency and activated the tracker. You'll never guess where it's been taken.

The main console beeped and map of the top of the world popped up, with the beacon indicator right in the center.

"The Arctic?" asked Arcee skeptically as the Bots moved out of the medbay and over to the main console. Raf and Liliy ran up to the platform with the computers to see better. "Great. Another chance to freeze our spark plugs off."

The computer zoomed in on the area. The beacon appeared very close to a energon deposit.

Bulkhead whistled. "That’s an ND-7 class. Biggest unmineable energon deposit there is."

"Unmineable," followed Optimus, "until Starscream melts his way down to it."

"With the help of the lens," added Arcee.

Melting a glacier that size would cause sea levels to rise and demolish coastal cities.

Optimus got that decisive look. "Autobots, time to roll out."

A while later after the Bots had left, Liliy found Raf talking to the powered down Bumblebee. She leaned against the containment area’s doorframe to listen. He was telling him about his family.

"Rafael," said Ratchet, walking over, "I'm afraid Bumblebee can't hear you in power down mode. It's getting late. Why don't I bridge you home to your family?"

"Because I told Bee I'd stay. He's family too."

"Don't be ridiculous. You're not even the same species."

"That's being related, Ratchet," said Liliy. "It's not the same thing."

"Yeah," agreed Raf. "Here. I'll show you." He pulled out his phone and showed them a picture. "This is my family."

Ratchet knelt to get a closer look. "Hm. Yes. Very nice," he muttered.
"Very large. Sometimes I can shout and no one hears me."

"Yes, yes," replied Ratchet, not quite listening himself.

"But Bumblebee always listens," Raf continued, surprising Ratchet. "And I can understand him. I'm not sure why, but I do."

"Reminds me of my family," said Liliy. "I had a large one once but they are all gone now. So I made a new one. A bunch of family-less rabble banded together. We're not related but we consider each other family. None of you are related but you consider the other Autobots as your family right, Ratchet?"

He looked a little taken back by the question but he managed to stuttered out, "I suppose." He turned away and missed the knowing smiles that passed between the two humans.

Later, Liliy had moved up to her chair and Raf had his laptop out near Bumblebee.

"Rafael, I’m going to the supply vault to see if I can find parts to repair this," Ratchet said, holding the tool that Bumblebee broke. "You know what that means?"

"Don’t touch anything," answered Raf.

Ratchet nodded. "Same goes for you, Liliy." He looked over at her.

"Yes, Ratchet."

He disappeared down the hall next to the medbay.

Raf was talking to the yellow bot again when Bumblebee suddenly came online. He stepped out of the containment area.

"Bumblebee, wait!" Raf shouted, getting up to chase after him.

Liliy got up too but she stopped at the sight of the angry expression on Bumblebee’s faceplates. Bumblebee went to the bridge controls, entered some coordinates, and left via the bridge.

"Bumblebee," Raf called after him as the Bot disappeared.

"What did you do?" Ratchet asked, having come back when he heard Raf shout.

"Nothing. Bumblebee just got up and…"

"He was in power down. Where does he think he’s off too?"

Ratchet went over to the controls as the ground bridge shut down. Raf and Liliy joined him. He found the coordinates that Bumblebee used.

"These are the coordinates for the site of our previous battle with Megatron’s undead."

"Undead?" asked Liliy.

"Megatron used dark energon to raise Cybertronian corpses to fight Optimus."

Liliy looked horrified.
“Maybe we should call Optimus,” suggested Raf.

“Optimus is busy preventing a polar ice cap from melting,” replied Ratchet. “We need to handle this on our own.”

He reactivated the ground bridge. Just as Ratchet was about to go out, Bumblebee came back through.

“Bumblebee… What have you been doing?” He caught Bumblebee’s arm to see what he had in his servo. “Dark energon?” he asked incredulously.

Bumblebee, glaring, suddenly punched Ratchet in the face, sending him crashing into the concrete platform next to the bridge controls.

“Bee, what are you doing?” asked Raf as Bumblebee stepped menacingly closer.

Liliy grabbed the Raf around the waist, lifting him and backing away from the mech as he reached out a servo to grab the boy.

"Stay away from him," she hissed.

Raf was surprised by the threat in her voice.

"But, Liliy, Bee won't-"

"That is not Bumblebee."

The mech glared for a moment and then reached over to the controls and opened a new bridge. After Bumblebee left, Liliy let Raf go and he ran over to see if Ratchet was alright.

The medic groaned as he pushed himself up.

“Ratchet, are you ok?”

“I’m fine. More importantly, is Bumblebee?”

"Liliy said that wasn't Bee."

Ratchet looked surprised and turned to her. "What do you mean, Liliy?"

"I could tell. The look in his optics. It wasn't him. Perhaps it was Megatron. The cortical psychic patch could have acted like a two way path and the Con could have taken over his mind. Because that was not Bumblebee."

The medic looked shocked. "You're right. Why didn't I think of that before? Megatron was the only one who knew about the dark energon. And now he has bridge to almost the exact coordinates Optimus used," he said, checking the controls again. He opened the bridge. "Stay here."

"No. Bee needs me," argued Raf.

"Go ahead," Liliy reassured him. "I'll man the ground bridge."

"Alright. Come on, Rafeal."

The medic put the boy on his shoulder and left. As soon as the bridge shut down, Liliy pulled out her phone and hooked it up to the computer. A chat window opened up.
[I have the base to myself for a little while. Anyone want to chat?] she typed. She smiled cheerfully as the window was instantly flooded with replies from most of her ‘boys’.

Some time later...

{Lily. We need a bridge.}

Lily, startled awake by the comm, fell out of the chair in front the computer.

{Lily?}

"Yeah. Sorry. One ground bridge coming right up."

She opened a bridge.

“So what happen?” she asked after everyone came thru.

“Unfortunately, the lens was destroyed,” answered Optimus.

“And Megatron is back in action,” added Arcee.

“But we saved the day in the end,” Bulkhead commented.

“And we have Bee back.” Raf smiled down from the yellow bot’s shoulder.

“Lily, thanks for looking out for Raf while I wasn’t myself,” Bumblebee chirped.

“No problem, Bee. That’s what family’s for,” Lily replied, winking at Raf.

“Alright, Bumblebee, Optimus, over to the medbay,” said Ratchet. “You both need check-ups after all the excitement today.”

“Another one?” complained Bee.

Everyone laughed.
"Optimus, you need to see this," Ratchet called. Optimus joined him at the main console. "I had hoped that my growing expertise on the subject would remain purely academic, but, though faint, this is clearly a dark energon signature and it's moving fast."

A fast-moving blip traveled across the map on the monitor.

"Megatron," said Optimus, optics narrowing.

Liliy was up on her catwalk but she was curious about dark energon so she leaned over the rail to listen better.

"Where'd he find more of the bad stuff?" asked Arcee.

"And what's he gonna do with it?" wondered Bulkhead. "Recruit a new army of the undead?"

"Zombie-cons?" Liliy heard Miko ask excitedly but the Bots did not appear to hear her.

"We cannot rule out the possibility," answered Optimus. "Especially since Megatron seems to heading to a familiar sight."

"The place where we buried Skyquake," confirmed Bumblebee after the blip stopped moving.

"Megatron has barely emerged from stasis. And it seems he's already making up for lost time. Bulkhead, Bumblebee, Ratchet, prepare to roll out," ordered Optimus.

"Me?" Ratchet questioned their leader.

"If we are dealing with dark energon, I may well require your expertise," Optimus explained. He turned to the little blue femme he hadn't addressed yet. "Arcee."

"Bridge operator. Got it." Arcee moved over to the bridge controls and entered the coordinates.

"Go get'em, Bulkhead. Bring the hurt," called Miko from Liliy's chair, now seemingly uninterested as she drew in her notebook.

Bulkhead responded by smashing his fists together with a loud clang. The boys stared suspiciously at Miko from the couch.

"That's not like Miko to not want to go," observed Jack.

"She's definitely up to something," Raf agreed.

Arcee activated the ground bridge. The away team transformed as they entered the portal. The instant they disappeared, Miko tossed aside her notebook and jumped out of the chair. She took off for the stairs knowing that Arcee had to keep the portal open long enough for the team to get through.

"Making a break," said Jack as he jumped up to follow her.
Raf got up to follow as well. Miko jumped down the stairs three at a time. Jack caught up with her and grabbed her arm to stop her just within the bridge tunnel.

"It's not safe," Jack scolded her.

"I am not going to miss my first zombie-con throwdown," cried Miko. She yanked her arm out of his grasp and disappeared into the portal.

"Miko!" Frustrated, Jack took off after her with Raf following.

Liliy watched all this and the oblivious Arcee with growing disbelief.

"You've got to be kidding me," she hissed, grabbing her cloak.

The nice thing about hyper speed was that Liliy could walk down walls without falling. She was on the main floor and entering the ground bridge before Arcee finished pushing the lever to close it. Leaping out the other side in just the nick of time, Liliy found herself in a rocky canyon. The Autobots were already walking ahead, unaware of the human children running up the slope behind them to get a better view.

"That's not Megatron." She heard Bulkhead say.

Liliy froze, realizing what she had done. Her thoughts had been about going after the children so she had forgotten that Megatron could be there. She was lucky that he wasn't and she dared not think about what would have happened if he was.

"RISE, SKYQUAKE! RISE!" an vaguely familiar voice shouted from beyond the Autobots.

Liliy hurried up the slope after the children so that she could see too.

"Let's see some fight of the living dead already," cheered Miko, reaching the edge of the ledge.

"Miko, what were you thinking?" Jack demanded, joining her.

"She wasn't," Raf answered, glaring at her.

"None of us really were," added Liliy, coming up behind them.

The children looked up at her in surprise.

"He-ey, Liliy," said Miko sheepishly.

"Jack's right," Liliy continued. "It really isn't safe for you to be out here."

"I know but I really wanted to grab a few pictures since I missed out last time." Miko reached for her phone but it wasn't in her pocket. "My cellphone!" She frantically checked her other pocket and then looked around on the ground. "I must have dropped it back at base!"

A sudden explosion rocked the ledge they were standing on, knocking the children off their feet. They looked up to see the Autobots had taken cover from Starscream. The seeker was covered in dents, scrapes, and weld marks, looking all around like he just came from a fight where he got his aft kicked.

"What happened to him?" Liliy asked, disturbed.

"Megatron probably beat him up as punishment," answered Raf.
"You cannot harm me while dark energon flows thru my veins!" claimed Starscream.

Optimus jumped up from his hiding spot and fired once. His single shot hit true and blasted Starscream's arm clean off at the elbow. The shocked seeker grabbed his amputated limb and ran for cover.

"See? I'm missing all the good stuff." Miko suddenly whirled on Jack and yelled at him. "I can't believe you made me lose my phone!"

That caught the Bots attention.

"H-how is this my fault?" asked Jack.

"Uh, guys," Liliy interrupted. "I think we're in trouble."

They looked up at her and then followed her gaze. The Autobots were staring at them with surprised expressions.

"Yep. We are," agreed Jack.

{Base to Optimus. The kids are missing. Lily too, I think.} Arcee's voice came thru Prime's comm.

"We have a visual on all of them. Send a ground bridge immediately," he replied.

A bridge opened almost instantly near them. A split second later, another portal opened next to Starscream. The Autobots looked back and forth between them in bewilderment.

"Two?" Ratchet turned to the humans. "You four, into our ground bridge! Now!"

Raf was already moving. Miko looked disappointed. Jack grabbed her arm.

"Come on!" he ordered, pulling her down the slope.

But Liliy stayed put. She stared at the two portals. Starscream disappeared into the one closest to him.

"Two bridges. Too close," she muttered. "Not good. Guys, wait!"

They didn't hear her shout as they entered the vortex. She slipped deftly down the cliff face and ran for the portal. She could see the portals destabilizing even as she entered the Autobots' bridge.

"Scrap! It's not going to hold!" she swore as the portal wavered around her.

The explosion threw her back, knocking her offline.

Ucon was on ground bridge duty on the Nemesis. He received a request from Starscream for an emergency bridge to his location. Entering the coordinates, Ucon activated the ground bridge. A moment later, Starscream came flying through and landed face first on the room floor. He groaned as he started to rise from the floor. A sudden realization struck him.

"My arm!"

He looked around for it for a moment then he looked up. Ucon was staring down at him from his
place in front of the controls. Starscream leapt to his pedes and jabbed a sharp digit against the
eradicon's chest plates.

"Not a word about this!" he ordered, shoving Ucon slightly as he moved past him. "To anyone!"
The door opened and Starscream ran smack into a vehicon.

"Out of my way," the seeker growled, shoving the grounder.
The vehicon stumbled back in surprise and fell on his aft. Starscream stomped off, grumbling.
Ucon came out to the hall.

"You ok, HQ-06?" he asked, offering the vehicon a servo.

"Yeah." He accepted the servo and Ucon pulled him upright. "Was it just me or was Starscream
missing an arm?"

"He was definitely missing an arm. But try not to spread it around," Ucon replied as they entered
the control room.

"I won't. I'd hate to see you get in trouble."

"Thanks for that. Now what can I do for you?"

"I need to go to mine HTZ-16."

"Your wish is my command," Ucon said, typing in the coordinates for that mine.

"You're funny, ZZ-05."

"Hey, someone's got to keep life on this gloomy ship."

"That… wasn't supposed to be a compliment."

"Well, I'm hard to insult." Ucon looked at the closed door. "You better go. AA-00 usually comes
around about this time for an inspection."

"Yikes. I really should go then. I'm late as it is."

"I'd hate to see you get in trouble."

"Thanks, ZZ-05."
The vehicon quickly disappeared into the portal and Ucon closed the bridge just before the
chamber door opened.

"ECHO!"

Sitting in the rec room with a cube of energon, Echo looked up from the data pad he was reading.
Mike appeared in the doorway.

"Echo! Where is Leecher?" The little miner was frantic.

"What's wrong, Mike? You're supposed to be-"
"Where are they?!" Mike practically shouted at him.

"In their office. Why?"

Instead of answering, Mike quickly disappeared. He ran across the main hall to where the offices were. Slamming his servo down on the keypad, he didn't even bother to knock. The door swished open and Leecher looked up at him from their seat behind their desk.

"Mike? What's wrong?" they inquired as Mike approached them.

"Sorry to barge in, Commander, but are you feeling alright? Is everything ok?"

"Yes…" Leecher replied hesitantly. "Why do you ask?"

"Because... " Mike paused and reset his vocalizer, not wanting to admit what he had seen. Leecher stared at him in silence, waiting. Echo showed up outside the open door. The miner seemed to shrink a little. "Because the Madam's spark signal is gone!"

There was a long moment of stunned silence.

"What?!" demanded Echo, entering the office. He grabbed Mike's arm and turned him. "Are you certain, Mike?"

"Do you really think I would be freaking out if I wasn't?" Mike turned back to Leecher, who continued to stare at them without a word. "I know that you and the Madam aren't technically spark-bonded but you have said in the past that if she were to die, so would you. The two of you have some sort of connection. Do you know if she is alive?"

"Yes," Leecher finally replied after another moment of silence. "The connection is still there but I cannot tell what her condition is. It's almost like she is really far away."

"It would be impossible for her to have been bridged off planet. Neither of the factions currently have the capability for space bridging," Echo supplied.

"So she has to be on the planet somewhere. Echo, have Bravo and Pepper run a diagnostic check on the SDS to make sure it hasn't malfunctioned. Mike, we will go back to the comm center and see if we can't find Liliy by some other means."

"Yes sir!"

Liliy groaned as she came back online. Her whole body, even her processor, ached. She wondered what happened and where she was but her optics were not responding. Her audio receptors kicked in just then and she could someone moving not far from her.

"You guys ok?" Jack asked, even though he didn't really sound too good himself.

"I think so…" Raf answered, a little uncertain.

"I've felt worse," groaned Miko.

"Liliy? What about you?" Jack inquired.

Liliy lifted her hand and laid it over her eyes. "I'll let you know when my head stops pounding."
The children slowly got to their feet as the dust around them cleared. They could see the Bots laying on the ground not far away. Bulkhead was the first to stir.

"Ugh." He pushed himself up and looked around. "Wha-what just happened?"

The others climbed to their pedes as well.

"I can't be certain," started Ratchet. "But if two ground bridges sent to the same coordinates cross streams, the feedback could have created a system overload."

"Could? Hello! More like totally did!" cried Miko at the same time Liliy mumbled, "Ya think."

"The kids made it through, right?" asked Bulkhead.

"Huh?" Raf voiced Liliy's thoughts as she turned her head in their direction, her optics still offline. She realized then that she could not sense the Bots' spark signals even though they were so close.

"What's he talking about?" questioned Jack.

Miko marched closer to the Bots. "Bulkhead, we're right here." She gestured to herself.

Optimus activated his comm. "Arcee, did the humans make it safely back to base?"

{Negative. You don't see them?}

"No sign," said Ratchet.

"What?" demanded Miko moving even closer to her guardian. "No sign?! Ok. Seriously, Bulk-Whoa!" The massive bot stepped toward her and then, when he stepped again, she passed right thru his pede. Miko screamed and stumbled backwards.

"He went right thru you." Jack caught Miko by the shoulders when she bumped into him. Raf reached out and grabbed the edge of Jack's shirt, as startled as the older two. "We're not alive."

"I don't wanna be a ghost." Raf tugged on Jack's shirt.

"Wait! How can we still touch each other?" Jack shared a confused look with Miko.

"Cause you aren't dead yet," Liliy suggested.

They turned to look at the woman who was still laying on the ground.

"Liliy, what are you doing? Are you ok?" Raf came over and knelt beside her.

"I can't see." Her hand was still over her eyes. She removed it. "Is there anything wrong with my eyes that you can see?"

"They are a darker shade of brown than usual." Miko leaned over Raf. "But that's it."

"Guys, the Bots are moving," Jack said. "We should stick close to them."

"Help me up, Jack." Liliy sat up and stuck out her hand. Jack grabbed her hand and braced. Liliy pulled herself up. "Lead the way."

Raf grabbed Liliy's hand from Jack. "I'll do it."

"Thank you, Raf," Liliy said, giving his hand a slight squeeze. He squeezed back.
They moved after the Bots.

"Ratchet," Optimus spoke. "Could the humans have been transported onto the Nemesis instead?"

"Not likely," Ratchet replied. "If Starscream didn't arrive at our base, the most likely explanation is a dislocation. The humans may simply have been bridged to an unintended destination."

The humans stopped.

"Another place… but in the same place," pondered Raf.

"Huh?" asked Jack. "What do you mean?"

"We're probably in a different dimension," explained Raf. "Some kind of alternate reality."

"A shadow zone?" suggested Liliy.

"Exactly," confirmed Raf.

"Nerd alert," Miko quipped.

"Miko."

"What?"

"Look, Skyquake's tomb is empty," Optimus was saying.

"How'd we miss Skyquake rising and shining?" asked Bulkhead.

"It would seem Starscream got what he came for," suggested Ratchet.

"Or not." Liliy turned around. She could hear and feel the vibrations of heavy footfalls even before the mech came into view of the children.

A giant claw reached around the rock. The body followed, giant and lumbering. The optics glowed purple in a blackened faceplates. His paint was faded and his plating patched with black rust. His joints creaked from disuse and he admitted an unintelligible roar. Staring in shock, the humans moved out of his way as he lumbered toward the Bots.

"Zombie!" Miko yelled, running after the Bots after regaining her senses.

"Miko, wait!" Liliy wondered what the girl was thinking.

"Guys, look out!" Jack joined Miko.

"Jack!"

"Bulkhead!" Miko yelled again.

"It's right behind you!" Raf let go of Liliy's hand and moved away her.

"Raf!" Liliy was alone now. She heard the children stop and a ground bridge open for the Bots. The zombie came up behind Bulkhead and swiped a claw at him. It passed right thru the wrecker. Confused, the zombie swiped again but nothing happened.

"Awesome. It can't touch them either," Miko said as the Autobots disappeared into the ground
bridge.

Liliy rolled her eyes. The zombie turned toward them with a roar.

"If that thing can't touch the Bots," Jack realized.

"Just like we can't," Miko added.

"Then we're trapped in the Shadow Zone with a Decepticon zombie," Raf observed.

"It would appear that way, yeah," supplied Liliy.

"If we aren't ghosts now, we will be soon," squeaked Miko.

"Then might I suggest we move," called Liliy.

The ground shook as the zombie stomped closer to them, roaring.

"Good idea." Miko turned to run, grabbing Liliy's hand as she passed her.

The boys followed. Jack took the lead and Raf started to lag due to his shorter legs. Suddenly, the younger boy tripped and fell.

"Raf!" Jack went back and grabbed him. "Come on." Jack dragged him over to the rock that Miko and Liliy were hiding behind.

"Jack, my glasses." Raf tugged on Jack's shirt.

Jack peeked around the rock. "Way too dangerous."

"I can't see without 'em," Raf protested.

"What are you, 90?" Miko asked.

"Not helping, Miko," Jack snapped.

"Fine!" She let go of Liliy's hand and moved to the edge of the rock.

"Wait!" Jack cried as Miko bolted from their hiding spot. She ran over and grabbed the glasses. Looking up, she saw that the zombie-con was right there. She dove out of the way to avoid getting stepped on. Then she dodged around its pedes and ran back to the others.

"Here you go, gramps." She handed Raf his glasses. "Let's book."

Liliy crouched. "Raf, if you'll be my eyes, I'll be your legs."

"Well..." Raf hesitated.

"Hurry up, Raf. It's coming," Jack urged.

Raf held onto Liliy's shoulders as she lifted him. He gave her some instructions but she mostly listened for Miko and Jack's footfalls and followed them.

"Maybe we could set a trap," suggested Miko as they ran. "Try to crush it."

"With what?" asked Raf. "Nothing around here is solid but us and the ground."
"We can't run forever," Miko shot back. "But maybe we can hide."

They ran until they came to a dead end. The humans stopped to catch their breath.

"Liliy, put me down for a minute."

Liliy knelt and let Raf down. She remained on one knee so that Raf could get up again if he needed to.

"Best thing about zombies," Miko gasped. "They're slow moving." She imitated the mech's walk while hunched over, swinging her arms loosely as she took a couple of slow steps.

Suddenly music filled the air. The kids just kind of looked around in confusion.

"Is that your…?" Liliy started, her head turned toward Jack.

"PHONE!" the children all gasped together.

Jack quickly pulled his phone out and flipped it open. "Hello? Arcee?" His only answer was static. "Nothing!"

"Gee. Imagine that," Miko ranted. "The fourth dimension has lousy cell phone reception."

"But the phone rang. We're getting some sort of signal. Maybe we can-" Liliy's phone beeped in her pocket, interrupting her. She pulled it out and handed it to Raf. "What's it say?"

"'Signal lost.' *beep* "'Tried to call. No answer,' "*beep, beep* "'SDS functioning normally.' And 'Where are you?' " Raf read aloud each message that popped up.

"Well. Now we know that we can get texts," Liliy said. "Try sending one to Miko's phone. It's back at base so the Bots might see it."

"On it." Jack started typing.

"Do you want me to reply to your texts?" Raf inquired.

"No." Liliy held out her hand and Raf gave her back her phone. "I'll just call them when we get out of here."

"You mean if," Miko corrected, crossing her arms.

"No. When. Because we will." Liliy smiled reassuringly.

"Not if the zombie gets us first!" cried Raf.

Liliy hadn't been paying attention so the zombie was able to catch up to them before she noticed it. It roared as it trudged toward them.

"Time to run again," Miko groaned.

"I sent the message," Jack snapped his phone shut and pocketed it. "Let's hope they see it soon."

"Raf." Liliy reached out and found the boy's shoulder. From there, she was able to scoop him up. He wrapped his arms around her neck as she ran after the older children with surprising accuracy. They ducked under its sweeping claw and slipped between the zombie's pedes.
"Deja vu," Miko commented as they ran.

"What's wrong?" Liliy asked, a few steps behind Miko and Jack.

"This looks familiar. I'm pretty sure we just ran one big circle."

Her observation distracted her and Jack and they ran smack into Starscream's amputated arm. They cried out as they bounced off it and fell on their bottoms.

"Liliy, stop!" Raf cried.

She stopped just short of tripping over Miko. "What is it?"

"Starscream's arm. It must of gotten trapped in here during the explosion too," Raf said.

"Well, if it's solid, we can use it," Jack replied.

Liliy decided she wasn't going to be much help since she couldn't see and she told the children as much as she set Raf back on his feet. They agreed with her and told her to wait behind a rock while they moved the arm into a better firing position. She listened to them grunt with exertion as they rolled the appendage around. Briefly tuning them out, she concentrated on trying to bring her optics back online. If she couldn't do it before they were rescued, her cover would have to be blown in order to get them repaired.

The whine of a rocket passing by her and an explosion brought Liliy back to her working senses. She stepped out from her hiding place.

"Did you get him?" she asked, trying to wave away some of the smoke from her face.

The answer hit her hard as a giant servo smacked her across the canyon. She barely registered the children screaming her name before she slammed into the rockface. Her body slipped to the ground, offline for the second time that day.

The children stared in horror at Liliy's limp form. The zombie-con roared in triumph. However, before it could continue, its right arm, damaged by the children's shot, snapped off at the elbow. The zombie-con stared down its detached appendage. The children stared at it too. One of the digits twitched. Then the servo flexed, made a fist, and flipped over. Much faster than the zombie, the servo scrambled toward the children, using its digits to pull itself along.

"Come on! Come on!" Jack yelled as he turned to run.

"But Liliy-" Miko started.

"We have to run or we're zombie chow!" Jack pulled on her arm. Raf was already ahead of them.

They ran away with the servo giving chase and the zombie-con slowly lumbering after them, leaving Liliy where she fell.

Everything hurt worse this time when Liliy finally came online again. But this time her optics actually came online. She blinked and stared at the gray sky. Where was she again? There was the distant roar of the zombie-con. Right. She and the children were stuck in a shadow zone. The children...

"The children!" Liliy sat up quickly despite her body's protests. But she had to hold still for a
moment before she could stand up because the dizziness in her processor. She slowly climbed to her feet. The dizziness finally passed. Slipping out of her cloak, she bent into a runner's crouch. And in the blink of an eye, she was gone.

Liliy caught up with the zombie-con first. She circled it as it lumbered on in slow motion. This was the power of dark energon, raising corpses from the dead to become mindless terrors? The very thought disgusted Liliy. She was going to have to put down this walking corpse. But before she did, she wanted to make sure that the children were alright. She ran past the crawling limb and found them running for their lives. That was good. Since they were not in absolute, immediate danger, Liliy turned and went back to the zombie-con.

Her fingers curled around the rod that slipped out of her forearm. The short rod transformed into a staff as she ran up the mech's body. A slight hum filled the air as the laser blade activated. It was longer than before, long enough to reach all the way thru the mech's neck. Liliy closed off her olfactory system against the smell of burning materials and her audios against the sizzles and popping. She would've closed her optics but she didn't want to end up falling off. She deactivated the blade as soon as it was clear of the neck. The helm slid off, hit the ground with a thud and rolled. The body shuddered and fell over. Liliy jumped clear before it hit the ground.

The children stopped when they came around a bend and spotted Starscream's arm again.

"Oh, come on," Miko groaned. "This place is like one big merry-go-round."

"Look!" Raf pointed at something beyond the appendage. "Isn't that Liliy's cloak?"

Jack ran over and picked it up. "Yeah, it is. Do you think she's ok?"

"I hope so. But we aren't going to be," Miko said, looking back the way they had come.

The zombie-claw came scurrying around the bend. As it raced toward the children, it suddenly stumbled and the arm flipped over the servo. It twitched for a moment and the children thought it might get up again. But it did not.

"Raf! Jack! Miko!" They heard Liliy yelling. She came around the bend and spotted them.

"Liliy!" all three cried together as they ran to her. She dropped to her knees as they reached her and let Raf and Miko hug her. She hugged them back as best she could with one arm.

"I'm glad to see that you three are alright." She smiled at Jack.

"Wait. You can see again?" Miko pulled away to look at her face. So did Raf. They noticed that the red tint had returned.

"Yeah." Lily shrugged. "After the zombie smacked me into the wall, I could suddenly see again. It's really weird."

"Skyquake!" a voice shouted, causing the children to flinch and turn around. "Your master summons you!"

"What? How did he get into our dimension?" Miko asked, glaring up at the approaching Starscream.

"He didn't." Liliy stood up. "He can't see us."
Suddenly a ground bridge opened between the humans and the seeker.

"Oh, that must be our way out," said Liliy.

"The Autobots saw our text!" cheered Miko.

"But if we go through," Raf said, "we'll run smack into Starscream."

"Would you rather endless roam this canyon?" asked Liliy.

"Not really." Jack approached the portal.

Liliy got up and stood beside him. She took her cloak from him and put it back on. Miko and Raf joined them in front of the portal. "On three we go thru. The Bots can't bridge here to help us until this bridge is closed so we better move. One. Two. Three!"

All four jumped through the portal together. Landing at the seeker's pedes, they got up and ran between his legs. Starscream turned as the portal closed.

"Humans? Where did you vermin come from?" he screeched.

They ignored him as they continued to run, but they stopped when another ground bridge opened before them. Optimus stepped out of it, flanked by Arcee and Bulkhead. Starscream saw this and fled in the opposite direction.

"Jack, Miko, Rafael. And you, Liliy. Time to get back to base," Optimus commanded.

The humans nodded solemnly and walked past the Bots to enter the portal. Optimus gazed after Starscream for a moment before following his Bots and the humans back to base.

"Look, if you're going to blame anybody," Miko said to Optimus after they all returned, "blame me."

"I'm sorry. Could you repeat that a couple dozen times?" asked Jack.

Miko glared at him.

"Miko," Optimus said. "What you endured has been lesson enough. We're just glad you're all safe."

He smiled down at them.

Bulkhead knelt by Miko. "Guess it was a good thing you dropped this." He held out her phone on the tip of one digit. She took it from him. "Too bad you didn't any pictures though."

"Nah. That's ok. I think after today I pretty much have zombie close-up seared into my brain." She made frame in front of her face with her fingers.

"Tell me about it," groaned Liliy.

"Liliy, are you ok?" Raf asked. "You're limping."

"The 'adrenaline' is wearing off. Everything hurts. I'm gonna go lay down." She hobbled up the stairs and over to the elevator.

"What happened to her?" asked Arcee.
"She kind of got smacked into the canyon wall by the zombie-con," Jack explained. "The way everything went crunch, I'm surprised she even got up."

"Liliy! Come back down here and let me do a check-up!" Ratchet called up to her as she left the elevator.

"You come up here," she shot back weakly. She lowered herself onto her sleeping bag and was out like a light.

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter you got to meet Ucon, the CRC's spy on the Nemesis, again. (He was the eradicon who let Wheeljack escape in chapter 3 'Con Job'.) On the Nemesis, his designation is ZZ-05. As such, he is working as a servant class doing chores on the Nemesis. This is based off the vehicon organization headcanons of fellow Tfp fic writer, Lizwuzthere. (She is on here. Go check out her stuff.)
"Ratchet! Bulkhead needs a ground bridge." Miko waved her open phone at the orange and white medic.

"Very well." Ratchet went over to the bridge controls and punched in Bulkhead's coordinates.

The Wrecker came hobbling thru the open portal sporting quite a few dents and some cracked armor.

"Bulkhead, what happened to you?" asked Ratchet.

"I kinda had a run in with Breakdown."

"Again?" Miko was not happy.

"Over to the medbay, Bulkhead," Ratchet ordered. "Liliy, would you call Optimus back to base?"

"Sure thing, Ratchet." Liliy pulled out her phone.

Optimus returned while Ratchet was welding Bulkhead's armor back together. Liliy had told him the gist of what happened. He went straight over to the medbay with Arcee and Bumblebee in tow.

"Engaging the enemy on your own was foolish, Bulkhead." Optimus was stern.

"Breakdown jumped me," Bulkhead defended. "I knew I could take him. Ugh!" He jerked his arm slightly under Ratchet's welder.

"Stay still," Ratchet ordered gently.

"But we should see the other guy. Right, Bulk?" Miko asked enthusiastically. She stood on the first tier next to the medbay.

"Uh, yeah. About that," Bulkhead hedged.

"You didn't torch him?" She sounded disappointed.

"Not exactly. I figured you all did." He gestured to the other Bots.

"Oh." Miko was definitely disappointed.

"When I came to, Breakdown was just gone," continued Bulkhead. "I remember hearing a copter. Maybe it was Agent Fowler."

"Not me," said the named agent as he stepped out of the elevator. "But I have an idea who."

"Let me guess. It was probably MECH, right?" asked Liliy as he walked past her.
"Possibly," the agent replied. To the Autobots, "Show me where this Con-napping occurred."

"Liliy, would you mind? I need to finish up Bulkhead's repairs." Ratchet didn't even look up from his welding.

"Certainly, Ratchet."

Agent Fowler followed Liliy over to the computers. Optimus moved over there too.

"This," Liliy pulled up a map on the big monitor so that the Bots could see as well, "is where we picked up Bulkhead."

"The Kamchatka peninsula in eastern Russia," confirmed Fowler. "Much of it was abandoned 20 years ago when its volcano first erupted. And, as you guess," he looked at Liliy, "my intel reported MECH activity there earlier today."

"MECH? You mean those techy guys?" asked Miko. She had followed them from the medbay.

"The very ones who know of our existence on your planet," said Optimus.

"As I recall, the CRC intervened last time you met MECH and the Autobots' identities at least were saved," corrected Liliy. "So by 'your existence', you mean Cybertronians in general."

Optimus just stared at her. Bulkhead and Ratchet joined them since the medic was finished with the Wrecker's repairs.

"They must've tracked one of us there somehow," said Bulkhead.

"But what would they want with Breakdown?" inquired Miko.

"What's it matter? They can have him," Arcee pointed out.

Bumblebee buzzed in agreement.

"Ha, yeah. Dragged off by humans. Guess I softened him up for 'em huh?" Bulkhead punched his palm and looked at Miko.

The girl looked away and shook her head. "Nyah."

"Ratchet, reactivate the previous ground bridge coordinates," ordered Optimus. "We will rescue Breakdown."

"What?!" Ratchet demanded.

"Optimus," Liliy interjected before the others could say anything. "I think if you want to continue hiding from MECH, you should consider asking the CRC to rescue him since the Cons are most likely not going to do it."

"And why would the CRC bother with rescuing Breakdown?" Arcee wanted to know, but her tone suggested she thought Liliy's idea was foolish.

"The same reason Optimus wants to," Liliy shot back with a glare. "To keep Cybertronian tech out MECH's hands. Do you have any idea what kind of chaos your weaponry or even just your basic biology could cause in the hands of a warmongering human like Silas?" She knew that they did, in fact, know but she wanted to remind them.
"How do we even know the CRC can do it?" It was Agent Fowler this time.

"Why not ask?" Liliy walked over to the computer and brought up the message from the CRC. Hitting reply, she typed a short message.

'To Leecher: Kamchatka peninsula, MECH, Rescue Breakdown.'

She hit send. The message became a scrambled mess of letters, numbers, and Cybertronian glyphs and disappeared. One minute later, they received an un-encrypted message.

'Roger that. Will contact when mission is complete.'

"There you go. They'll do it. Leave it to the CRC. Alright, Optimus?" She looked up at the mech.

"As you wish," Optimus relented. "But if we don't hear back from them in two hours, we will go ourselves."

Liliy nodded. Under her cloak, she texted Echo about the time limit. She stood up.

"Well, I think I'll take a nap while we wait."

She went up to her corner and set up a hologram of herself sleeping. Then she hypersped down the wall and into the hall where she called up an emergency ground bridge back to the CRC base.

Everyone was gathered in the Comm center when Liliy arrived. Leecher was already briefing them.

"Hey, Liliy. We didn't think you were going to show," said Leecher when they saw her.

"With only a two hour window, I had no choice." She turned to Echo. "Do we have satellite feed yet?"

"Coming right up, Madam." The comm officer typed away at the keys and some live satellite feed popped up on the huge monitors. There was movement in the supposedly abandoned area. Echo zoomed in on the movement.

"Yep. Definitely MECH," said Leecher. "So what do we do, Lil'?"

"First of all, what is Breakdown's location?"

"Here." A blue Decepticon symbol appeared on the screen. Echo explained, "We believe he is being kept in an underground train station that was used to ship materials to and from the local factory. The best entrance for us is here." He pointed at where the twin railroad beds disappeared into the concrete tunnel entrance. "But it is likely that there will be some sort of door or gate somewhere in the tunnel to keep out trespassers. MECH will probably be using it."

Liliy stared at the monitor for a long moment. "Whiskey." The gold and brown mech stood at attention. "I want you to do a flyover. I want a body count. The whole compound if possible but if you can only get the humans outside, that's fine." The mech nodded. "Also, see if you could figure out where they're drawing power from. Coordinate with X-ray and take it out if you can." She clicked a button that zoomed in even closer on one of MECH's green cars. "Romeo, Tango."

"Undercover. Got it." The dark red mech and the orange one stood together.

"You two will cover the tunnel entrance. If there is a door, I'll take care of it. Leecher will escort
me. The rest of you, stand by as backup. We may need some cover when we get Breakdown out."

Silas' men stopped working on Breakdown when a loud bang shook the tunnel. The man at the computer activated to the security feed of the tunnel door. The door had been cut clean from the frame and pushed inward. It had fallen on the tracks and crushed at least one guard, whose arm could be seen sticking out from under it. Stepping out of the darkness from beyond the doorway was the mech that shot down their helicopter the day they tried to steal the DNGS. The remaining guards opened fire but their bullets simply bounced off the mech's thick armor. Their left servo transformed into a blaster and a second later the nearest human was charcoal. The other humans scattered, firing sporadically as they ran. Then the power went out.

Leecher watched the humans running around in the dark. They must have had night vision goggles because they were still shooting at them occasionally. They fired their blaster a couple more times at the humans as they walked down the tunnel. A back-up generator must have kicked in because red emergency lights started flashing. MECH was gone when Leecher made it to the place where they were working on Breakdown. The Decepticon lay strapped to a slab with several giant sized surgical tools looming over him. Breakdown craned his neck to look at them as they approached.

"Who are you?" Breakdown couldn't help but ask suspiciously.

"A friend," Leecher replied, pushing aside the tools. "For now."

In the dim flashing light, the strange mech could almost be mistaken for a vehicon. But, the longer Breakdown stared at them, the more he noticed was out of place. The visor in the mask was too wide and it was orange. Their paint job seemed to absorb the light rather than reflect it. The glass was missing from their chassis design and he realized that there was no Decepticon insignia.

The metal straps on the Con's wrists came off quite easily but the large one around his middle proved to be more difficult. Finally, after a couple of hard tugs one side, the bolts snapped. Leecher bent the strap back and out of Breakdown's way. They offered the Con their servo.

Breakdown glanced at the five digited servo, the final confirmation that this was not a vehicon as he first assumed. He grasped it anyway and the mech pulled him upright.

"They manage to dissect you without spilling much of your energon." Leecher scanned him from helm to heel strut. "Impressive. Think you can walk?"

Breakdown sheepishly pushed the panels of his chest cavity closed. "Uh, yeah. I think so."

"Then let's get out of here." They led the way back down the tunnel.

There was a group of humans waiting for them before they reached the end of the tunnel. Leecher plowed through them as if they weren't even there. Outside was chaos. MECH was in a firefight with Romeo, Tango, and X-ray. The sports cars held position on either side of the tunnel entrance while the utility truck was perched on top. They fired at anything that moved. The humans were doing a lot of moving and firing back. And Whiskey was taking his time playing with the helicopters. Leecher activated their blasters and started shooting, keeping themself between the humans and Breakdown.

"Ground units, code red! Scatter!" Leecher yelled.

The visors of the three other grounders flickered and turned from orange to red before they disappeared. The some of the humans actually stopped firing for a moment. Beings that large should not be able to vanish in the blink of an eye.

"Sir, five bogies incoming on the ground," the pilot told Silas. They were keeping their distance and watching the fight from a helicopter.

Silas picked up his radio and spoke into it. "All units, disengage and initiate Omega protocols." Then, to the pilot, he said, "Hold position. I want to see what the newcomers look like."

"Sir! Aren't those the vehicles from the DNGS convoy?" the pilot asked suddenly. He pulled a magnified picture of the approaching vehicles up on the copter's computer. The said vehicles stopped at the edge of the carnage that MECH left behind and transformed.

"It would seem that Special Agent Fowler has been keeping some big secrets." Silas grabbed a pair of binoculars to get a closer look at the tall red and blue mech who appeared to be the leader.

The new mech seemed to be arguing with the black one. The black one put a servo to their helm and looked up at the helicopter. The rest of them looked up as well. A line of distortion passed through the humans' field of vision, so faint they weren't sure if it had been real until the air in front of their helicopter distorted again and they were nose to nose with a strange aircraft twice their size. The pilot was so surprised, he jerked back on the controls and sent the helicopter spiraling. He quickly corrected course and fled. The strange aircraft disappeared into thin air again.

"Thank you, Whiskey." Leecher lowered their servo and looked back at Optimus. "Now that MECH is gone, we will escort Breakdown away from this place. As we said before, you were not needed. Farewell."

Leecher transformed and Breakdown followed suit. They left the Autobots standing there. Several miles down the road they came upon the other CRC grounders. Leecher transformed and walked forward to meet them. Breakdown hung back in his alt-mode and listened.

"All that effort we put into protecting the Autobots' identities from MECH and then they had to go and show their faceplates," complained Romeo.

"We had this mission," agreed Tango who was sitting on a boulder next to the road. "They should have just stayed home and trusted us."

Like a vehicon, the black mech had sharper edges to their frame, Breakdown observed. But the dark red one and the orange one were smoother and more curvy, like Knock Out. Those three were about the red doctor's height too. The fourth mech was taller than his companions, about the same height as Breakdown himself and his blue frame was mix of smooth lines and sharp edges. They all had vehicon masks atop their helms and energon blue optics.

"Well, they did give us a two hour window," Leecher said. "Prime just wanted to make sure the job was done."
Tango huffed and crossed his arms.

Breakdown finally transformed. "Uh, sorry to interrupt but, who are you guys?"

They all looked at him and Romeo winced at his missing optic.

It was Leecher who answered. "We're Neutrals."

"We're rebels," corrected a new voice behind Breakdown.

The Con turned to see a fifth mech coming toward them. This one was gold and brown and appeared to be a flyer. He was the tallest of all of them. Whiskey pushed his mask up and gazed at Breakdown.

"We used to be Decepticons," he said, tapping his mask.

Breakdown looked shocked. "You used to be…" He looked back at the others.

Leecher moved toward him. "Mind keeping your rescue between us, Breakdown?"

"Uh, yeah. Sure," the Con replied still somewhat shocked.

"Good. Now then."

A ground bridge opened nearby. All the grounders disappeared thru it.

"Keep up the good work," Whiskey commented before he too disappeared thru the ground bridge, leaving Breakdown to wonder what he meant.

"Good job, everyone," Liliy said once all her 'boys' had returned to base.

"Except we didn't finish before the time limit," grumbled Romeo.

"It couldn't be helped," X-ray chimed in. "We'll just have to deal with the consequences as they come."

"Well said, X-ray." Liliy smiled up at him. "Now, as much as I would really love to stay, I have to get back. They think I'm napping."

"When are you going to tell them that you are the head of the CRC?" Tango asked.

"Eventually. Probably at some point when they are in dire need of assistance and they have no time to question me about it."

"Ha. That will be great. I can almost imagine their surprised looks too." Romeo chuckled.

"Hmh. Yeah. Well, I should go. Call me if you need anything. Even if you just want to chat." Liliy nodded at Alfa.

The tall mech typed in the coordinates and opened the ground bridge.

"Bye, Madam," most of the mechs chorused together as she waved to them before stepping thru the portal.
Back at the Autobot base, she sped back up to her corner and turned off her hologram. She pretended to yawn and stretch before looking down at those gathered below.

"Did they win?" she asked in her best sleepy voice.

"Breakdown was successfully rescued. Congratulations," said Ratchet.

"Thanks," Lily muttered with a knowing smile after he went back to watching the monitors. She turned her head and noticed that Prime was staring at her again. She frowned. He looked like he was trying to remember something, but then his attention was turned when Miko asked him a question.

Upon getting a bridge back to the Nemesis, Breakdown tried to hurry out of the receiving room.

"Commander Breakdown, what happened?"

Breakdown flinched and slowly turned to face the eradicon who addressed him. He suspected the concern in his voice was reflected on the faceplates behind his mask.

"I'd rather not discuss it, ZZ-05."

"Yes, sir." The mech nodded. "Would you like me to accompany you to the medbay, then?"

Breakdown thought about for a moment. "Yes."

Ucon turned to the other eradicon. "Think you can handle the fort without me for a while, Four?"

"Yeah. You go ahead. The commander is important."

Breakdown gave ZZ-04 a small smile and followed Ucon into the hall. "ZZ-05, you were stationed on Earth before you were assigned to the Nemesis, right?"

"Yes. I was." Ucon wondered why Breakdown would bring that up.

"Did you ever hear about a group of Neutrals stationed on this planet?"

Ucon checked the hallway to make sure that no one was nearby before he whirled on Breakdown and pushed the bigger mech against the wall. "It is in your best interest to forget about them. Those mechs are dangerous."

Breakdown stared at him in surprise. "But they saved me from the humans."

The eradicon pulled back. "From MECH?"

"Yes." It didn't occur to Breakdown to ask how he knew about MECH.

"Of course they did," Ucon said, mostly to himself. He turned down the hall again. "But those Neutrals… did they tell you anything?"

"They said they used to be Decepticons." Breakdown followed again, keeping a wary optic on him. He hadn't expected a servant class to get violent with an officer, especially one as easygoing as ZZ-05. "Did you know them?"

"Not before they turned Neutral."
"So you have met them?"

"Every time someone met them, some of their numbers disappeared... Like my entire squad one night while I was on a scouting mission." Ucon wasn't lying to Breakdown. He was just leaving out some major details. He wasn't going tell him that his squad was actually wiped out by Autobots and the CRC just came in to clean up the mess as they always did. That the only other member from his squad to survive was one of the Neutrals. He just want them to sound dangerous.

Before Breakdown could question him further and much to Ucon's relief, Knock Out rounded the nearest corner and almost walked into them because he was reading a datapad.

He looked up. "Ah, there you are, Break-" He cut short as he took in the blue mech's battered state. "Primus! Breakdown, what happened to you? Come with me to the medbay. Quickly!" The smaller red mech grabbed his assistant's servo and pulled him along.

Breakdown followed obediently. And Ucon could have swore he saw some of the tension leave the poor mech's frame as he listened to the medic fuss over him before they disappeared around the corner.

For a moment, Ucon just stood alone in the hallway, wondering what his old squad mate was doing at that moment. Then, with a sigh, he turned and headed back to his workstation.
Since Lily gave the order to keep an eye on Jasper, they kept it live on one of the many side monitors in the Comm center. When Echo walked in to take over watch duty from Lima, he happened to glance at that particular monitor.

“Lima.” He leaned forward to get a closer look at the monitor.

“Hm?” The little femme turned from the main monitor.

“How long has Airachnid been in Jasper?”

“What?”

Echo pointed at the little pink Decepticon symbol blinking on the edge of the town.

“Oh… I don’t know?”

Echo reached over and pressed a button, opening a channel to Leecher’s office.

{Yes?}

“We have a problem,” Echo informed them.

{What is it?}

“Airachnid is in Jasper, Nevada. And we don’t know how long she has been there.”

{Inform the Madam immediately. And have Whiskey and Zulu meet us in the receiving room.}

Lily sat up straight in her chair when she got the message.

“Something wrong, Lily?” Ratchet asked. He was working in the medbay.

“Oh, no,” she replied, turning to look at him. She held up her phone “No. It’s just my brother is in Jasper and he wants meet with me. Is there way I could, you know...?”

“I have to bridge back to Jack’s garage before his mother gets home,” Arcee suggested. “You can come with.”

“Thanks, Arcee.” Lily hurried down the stairs as Ratchet moved over to the bridge controls.

“You have to be back by tomorrow afternoon, at the latest.” Ratchet put in the coordinates for their bridge.

“Sure thing, Ratchet.”

Arcee and Lily bridged to Jack’s garage just in time for Jack to get home. He was surprised to see
Liliy when the garage door opened.

“Liliy? What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Sorry. Gotta run.” And she jogged off down the block.

“What was that about?” he asked Arcee instead. “And is Mom home yet? I didn’t see her car.”

“I don’t know. We just got here,” Arcee explained. “Liliy said her brother was in Jasper and wanted to meet so she bridged over with me. By the way, there’s a package for you.”

Liliy walked up to the matte black El Camino parked on the street. She opened the passenger door and slipped inside. Behind the wheel sat a man who look almost exactly like Liliy except he had black hair and yellow-brown eyes and both arms.

“What’s the situation?” Liliy asked.

“Airachnid is working with MECH,” Leech answered. “We think they are here for the Autobot two-wheeler and her young friend. MECH has already been to the boy’s house.”

{Third-wheel is on the move.} came over the comm.

“Who is with you?”

“Just Zulu.” Leech’s holoform pointed at the black SUV parked up the street. “And Whiskey. He is watching MECH. The others are on standby back at base.”

Arcee and Jack drove past them. Jack had a gps device in his hand. After they turned the next corner, Leecher started after them. Zulu had to do a u-turn to follow Leecher after they turned the corner too. They drove slowly with their lights off so they didn’t draw any attention. A few blocks ahead, Arcee turned another corner into the town’s cement plant. As they approached the turn, they heard gun fire but by the time they reached the gate, Arcee and Jack were already inside the warehouse. Liliy stepped out of Leecher’s interior. Whiskey appeared next to them.

“MECH brought an adult female human here earlier,” Whiskey informed her. “I heard them mention that she was Jack’s mother. Airachind took her away and hid her somewhere in the compound.”

“That might complicate matters. Hmm. Very well. Whiskey, you and I will go find Mrs. Darby. Zulu, stay here and guard the gate. And be ready if someone needs backup. Leech, go see if you can rescue Arcee and Jack.”

“Roger that.” Leecher transformed and headed for the warehouse, while Liliy zipped up to Whiskey’s shoulder and they headed into the compound.

“Help them.” Leecher heard Arcee beg. They peeked inside the open door. Tied up in webbing, Arcee, with Jack beside her, was surround by MECH and Airachnid. “Please. They’re human, like you. You can’t let Airachnid.”

“A few human lives are a small price to pay for a miracle of science such as yourself,” Silas replied coolly, cutting her off.

“You say that, fleshling,” Leecher said, stepping forward and leaning casually on the doorframe
with their arms crossed. Everyone stared at them in surprise. “But tell us, the men you lost when Breakdown was rescued… did they die for a cause or were they just another ‘small price to pay’?”

“You again!” growled Silas after he got over his initial surprise.

Half his men aimed their weapons at them.

“You know this mech?” asked Airachnid.

Silas ignored her. “How did you find us?”

While sitting on Whiskey’s shoulder searching for June, Liliy pulled out her phone and dialed a number.

{Fowler} came the answer after the first ring.

“Hey, Agent Fowler, it’s Liliy. Just thought you’d like to know that MECH is Jasper.”

Liliy flinched when she heard Fowler choke on his drink. {What?!}

“It’s true. They have Jack, his mom and Arcee. You should bring backup right away.”

{Autobot backup?}

“Uhhh. No. That might be too much for Mrs. Darby in one night.”

{Understood. I’ll be there as soon as I can.}

“Thanks, Agent Fowler.” Liliy hung up and pocketed her phone.

“To be honest,” Leecher said, “we didn’t know MECH was here until we arrived. We were actually tracking the, uh, what did you call us? Transformers?”

“You were tracking us?” asked Airachnid. “Why?”

“That’s our job, of course.”

“How are you tracking them? What sort of signal?” Silas wanted to know.

“Hmh. One you could never replicate.” Leecher tilted their helm. “Hm. Jack, it sounds like we found your mother.”

“What?!“ Airachnid shrieked. She sprang into spider mode and made for the door.

Leecher pushed off the doorframe and blocked her path. “Ah, ah. Jack, first. She is his mother, after all.”

She started to raise her servos to fire webbing at them but Leecher’s visor flickered and turned red. The webbing slamming into the containers stacked outside the warehouse.

“You are going to have to be faster than that to catch us.” Leecher was kneeling outside the door and set Jack on his feet, much to everyone’s confusion. They turned Jack to face the compound.
“Go now. Your mother is in this direction and moving toward the gate.”

Jack didn’t have to be told twice. He broke into a run. Leecher stood to their pedes and dodged another volley of webbing. They looked at Airachnid. She growled them and then scurried after Jack.

“Well then, Autobot. Your turn.” Leecher stepped toward her.

“I don’t think so.” Silas raised his hand to signal his men.

Three different MECH agents fire electro-charges at Leecher. They all missed. Leecher was behind Arcee. They ripped away the webbing that bound her. Picking her up with an arm around her waist, they were outside the warehouse. They set her on her pedes. She looked up at them questioningly as their visor flicked back to orange. They just put a digit to their mouthpiece in the universal sign for quiet and then transformed and drove out the gate. Arcee watched them go before dropping to her own wheels and going after Jack.

“There she is.” Liliy pointed.

June was cocooned in webbing and hanging from one of the high platforms. Liliy raced up there in mere seconds.

“Whiskey, catch.” She transformed the rod out of her forearm. But instead of going full scythe, a half circle bar looped over her fingers and a crescent laser blade formed.

Liliy carefully cut the webbing holding the cocoon to the platform. June fell safely into Whiskey’s waiting servos. Stowing her blade, Liliy climbed back down. Whiskey laid the woman on the ground and gently ripped apart the webbing.

“Go ahead and disappear,” Liliy instructed as she knelt beside June. “We don’t want her to see you when she regains consciousness.”

Whiskey nodded and turned invisible. June moaned and opened her eyes.

“W-what happened? Where am I? Who are you? And who were those strange men?”

“It’s alright, Mrs. Darby. You’re safe for the moment but we need to get you out of here.” Liliy helped her sit up.

“How did you know my name?”

“My name is Liliy. I’m friend of Jack’s.” Liliy got back to her feet and offered June a hand up. Her help was accepted and she pulled the shorter woman to her feet. She turned, still holding June’s hand, and started for the gate. “Come. We need to get out of here.”

Liliy and June stayed close to the buildings and equipment as they made their way across the plant. Whiskey silently followed after them.

“Well, well, well,” a voice spoke up. “It looks like a pest is trying to make off with my plaything.”

Liliy turned toward the voice, pushing June behind her. Airachnid stood atop the next building, her spider legs supporting her.

“The robots are real?” June gasped, gripping Liliy’s cape as she peeked around the taller woman.
“MOM!” Jack was running toward them.

Airachnid saw him and laughed. “You’re too late, Jack.” She lunged off the building toward Liliy and June. Before she could reach them, she was suddenly knocked back by an invisible force.

“What was that?” June asked in a scared voice.

“Our guardian angel. Let’s go.” Liliy grabbed her hand and they broke into a run toward Jack.

With a yell, Airachnid clambered to her pedes. She spotted them and turned into her spider form to go after them. There was a roar of a motorcycle behind Jack. Arcee raced past her charge and transformed just before she reached the women. She leapt over them and slammed into Airachnid.

“Mom!” Jack cried as he reached them. He hugged her.

“Jack, was that your motorcycle?” Disbelieving, June turned to look at the battling femmes but they were now out of sight behind one of the buildings.

“I can explain, Mom- Wait. I already did.”

“Jack.”

“Liliy?” He suddenly realized she was there too. “What are you doing here?”

“I was with my brother when I saw you and Arcee drive past, so I followed you. I didn’t know where you went after you entered the plant so I was just wandering around and found your mom.”

They flinched when Arcee and Airachnid came crashing down near to them. Arcee got up and went to punch Airachnid but she was knocked roughly aside by a spider leg and webbed to the ground. Airachnid spotted the humans. Liliy stood protectively in front of the Darbys.

“Oh, so noble of you,” Airachnid sneered as Liliy glared up at her. “But you can’t protect them.”

Liliy suddenly smirked in a way that unnerved Airachnid. It was the only warning she got before she was again smacked away by an invisible force. Airachnid growled as she got back to her pedes. The noise of helicopters incoming interrupted any further fighting.

Liliy looked up. “Ah. Fowler’s finally here with backup.”

“You called Fowler?” Jack asked, watching the helicopters.

“MECH in Jasper, of course I did. What better way to scare them off than by bringing in the military? But I did tell him not to bring the Bots.”

Liliy’s phone rang as the helicopters opened fire on Airachnid.

{You didn’t say anything about Cons.} Fowler said after she answered.

“I didn’t know at the time,” Liliy lied. “Next time, I’ll be more thorough in my investigating.”

{Humph.} And the call ended.

The helicopters ceased firing because they couldn’t see Airachnid anymore through the dust. She suddenly appeared out of the dust, beams of light shooting out of her optics as she scanned the nearest helicopter. Leaping into the air, she transformed into her newly acquired vehicle mode and flew away.
“No!” Arcee cried, unable to get up. She was surprised when the webbing was suddenly ripped off her and she was lifted to her pedes by a servo around her arm. She stared at the empty air beside her as the servo on her arm went away. “What?”

The air rippled slightly, revealing for a brief second the silhouette of a mech. Then he was gone.

The helicopters landed and the soldiers went looking for MECH while Agent Fowler came over to Lily, Jack, and June. Lily met him before he reached the Darbys.

“Apparently, Jack has already told his mother something about the Bots,” she said in a low voice, “so be honest with her, alright?”

Fowler sighed heavily but nodded anyway. He approached Jack and June.

“Mrs. Darby, I’m Special Agent William Fowler. It’s time you knew the truth. For the past several months, Jack has been interning as a liaison to a government secret. Part of which you saw tonight. I would formally request that you allow him to continue and that you would keep anything you learn to yourself.”

Lily laughed. “Interning as a liaison? Then what does that make me? An exchange student?”

Fowler shot a glare at her. “Why are you even away from the base without an escort?”

“My brother was in town and he wanted to see me.”

“And where is your brother now?”

Lily held up her phone. “He just texted me saying he left. He has to be in south Cali by tomorrow evening.”

“Agent Fowler,” one of the soldiers called.

“Excuse me, Mrs. Darby.” Fowler stalked off to talk to the soldier.

“I think you made him angry,” Jack said to Lily.

“Aww, he’ll get over it. Oh, hey, Arcee.” She looked up at the Autobot who was approaching them.

“And she would be your…?” June asked Jack.

“Motorcycle, guardian, Autobot, friend,” Jack listed as Arcee came up and knelt beside him.

“Call me Arcee.” The femme smiled.

“Thank you, Arcee.” June smiled back.

“I think it’s time for that ride you once made me promise,” suggested Jack.

“Right now?” his mother replied. “It’s the middle of the night. At least wait till morning, Jack.”

“Well, it looks like MECH cleared out before we could get to them,” Fowler said as he rejoined them. “Thanks for the warning, though, Lily.”

“No problem.”

“But you do need to go back to the base now.”
“Yeah. Yeah. I’m going. I’m going.” Liliy walked off as she pulled out her phone again. “Hey, Ratchet, could I get a ground bridge?”

The green portal opened in front of her and she disappeared into it before it closed.

“What was that?” gaped June.

“I’ll explain later,” Jack told her. He took her hand. “Right now, let’s go home.”

The next day Jack brought his mom back to base to meet the rest of the Autobots. As Jack went through the introductions, June stared up at the Autobots in awe.

"And you already met Liliy last night," Jack said, gesturing to the tall woman beside him.

Liliy extended her hand. "Hello again, Mrs. Darby. How are you feeling today?"

June shook her hand. "A little overwhelmed but fine, thanks."

"Liliy pretty much lives here."

"Here? But does your family know where you are? Aren’t they worried about you?"

Liliy shrugged. "Not really. And probably, but they do know that I’m safe and they can take care of themselves. I usually travel a lot anyway so they are used to not having me there."

"You have not mentioned your family before," said Optimus.

Liliy just glanced at him.

"Is it the one you told me about?" asked Raf. "Where none of you are really related?"

Liliy smiled. "Yes, Raf."

"How big is your family? Bigger than mine?"

"There are 28 of us."

"Whoa. That’s a lot. Are they all girls?" asked Miko.

"Haha. No. Actually, I am the only female."

"I can see why you like to travel then," observed June. “Living with 27 guys must be rough."

"Sometimes. They like to use my homecomings as an excuse to party. They can get rowdy but they are a good bunch. And I can always count on them when I need help."

“I have a question about last night. Was there another robot, er-?” June hesitated.

“Mech,” Liliy offered. “The proper term is mech. Except for Arcee. She is a femme.”

“Alright. Was there another mech or femme there last night? Besides the spider?"

“Well, Leecher was there,” Jack said.

“They left after they pulled me out of the warehouse after you ran off,” Arcee commented. “But
there was someone else there. A mech with some sort of cloaking device that made him invisible. I only saw him for a second.”

“A cloaking device?” inquired Ratchet. “It couldn’t have been Mirage, could it?”

“I don’t think so. I couldn’t tell much about him but he may have been with the CRC.”

“CRC?” asked June.

“Cybertronian Rebel Corps,” answered Liliy. “They are a neutral faction of Cybertronians.”

“There’s a third group?” June put her hand to her head. “Oh, this is so confusing.”

Jack laid a hand on her shoulder. “It’s alright, Mom. It takes a bit to get used to.”

About a week later…

“Arcee, a vehicular form is approaching,” Ratchet said.

“Decepticon?” Arcee asked.

The surveillance image on the monitor zoomed in and cleared. It was a small white car.

Jack facepalmed. “Mom.”

Arcee put her servos on her hips. “Again?”

“She worries.”

Ratchet opened the base’s secret entrance for her. A couple minutes later, June pulled into the main room and parked her car.

“Hi, Honey,” she said as she got out and went over to Jack. She gave him a hug while he just stood there kind of awkwardly. She let him go. “Finished my shift early at the hospital so I thought I’d swing by.” She looked up at Ratchet. “Good to see you again, Doctor.” Then up at the blue femme next to Jack. “Arcee.”

The bots each acknowledged her with a nod.

"Hello, Lily," called June up.

"Hey," came the short reply from behind the easel on the catwalk.

"She’s not very talkative today, is she?"

"Oh, don’t mind her.” Jack shrugged. “She just gets that way when she draws or paints.”

"What’s she working on now?"

"No idea. But she usually shows us when she is done though.”

That evening after everyone returned from their missions.
"Well, I'm going to head home now, Jack, and make dinner." June headed for her car.

"Ok, Mom. I'll see you in a bit."

"Wait! Mrs. Darby!"

They looked up to see Liliy coming out of the elevator with a canvas in hand. She came down to the main floor.

“Please, Liliy. Call me June.”

“Yes.” Liliy smiled and held out the canvas for June to take. “This is for you.”

It was a painting of Jack and June together, smiling.

"Wow, Liliy. That is really good," said Jack, looking over his mother's shoulder. “It almost looks like a real photograph.”

"Do you like it, June?" asked Liliy with a slight frown when the nurse didn't say anything.

She nodded happily, tears welling up in her eyes. She hugged the taller woman suddenly.

"Thank you!" she said as she pulled away.

Liliy smiled again. "You are most welcome."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter covered both 'Crisscross' (s1e17) and 'Metal Attraction' (s1e18).
Rock Bottom

“Hey, Nova. Come look at this,” Mike said, leaning around the doorway of the receiving room. He quickly disappeared again.

Nova sighed and left the receiving room to follow his brother to the Comm center.

“What is it?” he asked, looking up at the big monitors.

He saw two Autobot signals, labeled Arcee and Bulkhead, with two Decepticon signals in close proximity. Those two were labeled Megatron and Starscream.

“Yeah. So? What about it?”

“Do those coordinates look familiar to you?” asked Mike.

Nova looked at the monitor, studying it. “Isn’t that one of the Decepticons’ old mining sites?”

“Yes, it is. I suspect that the reason the Autobots are there is because they detected some slight energon readings and went to check them out.”

“Ok but why are the Cons there?”

“I don’t know. It’s likely that neither group knows the other is there.”

“Well, it looks like they’re about to find out.”

Nova tapped a couple buttons and zoomed in on a section of the mine where the blip labeled Arcee was closing in on the Decepticon signals. The pair watched in silence for a few moments before the signals suddenly scattered and the computer registered some seismic activity in that area.

“Seismic activity...” Mike said as he typed away at the keyboard. “That can only mean one thing.” He paused and looked at Nova.

“Cave-in,” they chorused together.

“The Autobots could be stuck down there. We should go help them.”

“What!” Nova nearly choked.

“What if they had their human friends with them? Look, Nova. Neither of their signals are moving. We should at least go take a look.”

“But, Mike, you know we’re not allowed to leave the base without permission.”

“Yeah. But no one is here for us to ask. Madam’s with the Bots. Leecher’s on patrol. And Alfa is out on flying maneuvers with the rest of the fliers. So who are we supposed to ask?”

“Well, the next in command would be Bravo then.”

“He’s working on a project with Delta.”

“Charlie then?”

“...With Alfa. And Echo.”
“Foxtrot…”

Mike just stared at him.

“Yeah. You’re right. We can’t ask Foxtrot.”

“Can we at least just go take a look, Nova? Mining is what we’re good at. Caves are what we know. This could be our chance to help the Autobots for the Madam.”

“Well…” Nova shifted uneasily.

Mike smirked. He knew he had won.

“I guess it couldn’t hurt to at least check it out,” Nova relented.

“Alright! Let’s go.” Mike led the way out of the Comm center and back to the receiving room.

Nova typed in the coordinates and activated the ground bridge.

“We are going to get in so much trouble for this,” Nova said as they entered the vortex.

“Probably. But maybe we’ll have some fun too.”

They exited the ground bridge in a large cavern, their masks falling to cover their faceplates as they looked around.

“Yes, there’s definitely been a cave-in,” Mike said, examining the uneven ceiling and multiple piles of rubble scattered around.

“Scrap!” hissed Nova, drawing his brother’s attention.

“What is it?”

“I can pick up the other spark signals on my scanners but I can’t tell who is who anymore. The mineral composition of the cave walls must be causing interference.”

“That means comms will probably be sketchy too.”

The ground stopped shaking and the sounds of falling rocks had been reduced to the occasional rain of pebbles. Jack was wedged in small space created when two huge chunks of rock smacked into each other on the cave floor. The boy thought he was going to be crushed the way he had been jostled around. When the shaking finally stopped, he took a moment to collect his thoughts and realize that he was alive. Coughing from the dust, he pushed aside the small rocks around him and crawled slowly out of his little niche.

It wasn’t until Jack was fully out of his hole and sitting back on his knees that he realized he could not see a thing. Before the cave-in, light had been filtering in from various places in the ceiling and he had the aid of Arcee’s headlights to see as well. Now it was pitch black; he couldn’t even see his hand in front of his face. And it frightened him.

“A-arcee?” he shakily asked the darkness.

Only the quiet echo of his voice answered him. He tried again, louder this time.
“Arcee!” he called.

This time the echo was accompanied by some small stones falling but that was all.

“Oh, scrap,” Jack whispered, realizing that he was alone.

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his phone. He knew it wouldn’t work down in the cave but it would at least provide him with a little light. Flipping it open, he blinked in the sudden brightness. The light from the screen was not enough to illuminate the cave but he could at least make out the ground. He climbed to his feet slowly, as various bruises and other aches and pains made themselves known. Ignoring them, he moved carefully forward.

Trying to walk, or climb in some cases, over uneven terrain with only a flip phone for light was not easy. Jack had tripped multiple times and dropped his phone at least once. He stopped for a moment to try and get his bearings. His phone didn’t do much to reveal his surroundings but it did tell him that he had only been moving for about ten minutes. It seemed to him that it should have been longer than that. Squinting into the darkness, he figured it was time to try calling for the others again.

“Arcee? ...Bulkhead? ...Miko?”

Again only the echo of his voice answered him.

“Great. Just great,” he muttered to himself as he started moving again.

Jack hardly got ten feet before he stopped. He wasn’t sure but he thought he heard voices.

“HELLO!” he yelled as loud as he could.

This time he was relieved to hear a hesitant but replying “Hello?” overlapping his echoes. It was followed by heavy footfalls.

“Looks like I was right about the humans,” a voice said.

Jack’s gaze traveled upwards until he spotted a pair of parallel, orange v’s floating in the darkness. Suddenly a bright light clicked on, nearly blinding the boy and he raised his hand to shield his eyes.

“Primus, Mike,” scolded a second voice. “Easy with light. Are you trying to blind him?”

A large shadow passed in front of the light. Jack looked up again and, with growing horror, recognized the silhouette that was moving toward him.

“More Decepticons?” he gasped, backing away.

After a moment, he turned and tried to run. He hardly made it two steps before a three-clawed servo snatched him up. He kicked and struggled as he was lifted several feet into the air.

“Easy there, young one,” chided the second voice. “We don’t want to hurt you.”

“And we’re not Decepticons,” the first voice practically growled.

Jack stopped squirming and looked up at the two Cybertronians as they pushed their masks up to reveal their blue optics.

“My name is Nova,” the mech holding him said with a kind smile. “And this is my brother, Mike. What’s your name?”
“Uh, it’s Jack.”

“Nice to meet you, Jack.”

“Just so you know,” Mike leaned closer to Jack, “we may look like our Decepticon brethren but we aren’t Decepticons anymore. We’re part of the CRC.”

“The Cybertronian Rebel Corps?” asked Jack, looking from one to the other. “What are you doing here?”

“We were monitoring this area when we detected the cave-in. We dropped in to see if we could help,” explained Nova, pushing Mike back.

Mike moved away from them and shined his light around the cavern.

“Hey, Nova, look at this. One of the Cons’ old drills survived the cave-in.”

The inactive drill sat on the far side of the cavern where they were, casting eerie shadows on the wall as Mike ran his light over it.

“That could come in handy.”

The miners moved over to it.

“If it even still works.”

“It should,” Nova said as he carefully set Jack next to the drill’s controls. “Starscream isn’t one to leave faulty equipment lying around in a mine that still has energon.”

“You’re probably right,” replied Mike as he inspected the drill. He stepped back. “Go ahead and fire it up.”

Jack watched as Nova tapped a few keys and the console came to life. He pressed another key and the drill started to spin.

“Looks like it works,” commented Jack.

“Yeah, but we have another problem. We don’t know who is where. We can tell where the other Cybertronians are but we can’t tell who is who due to mineral interference.”

“I say we split up,” Mike said, sliding his mask back in place. “I’ll go for the closest one to the east. You take Jack and the drill and go the other direction. If you run into Megatron or Starscream, be careful.”

“I always am, Mike. You’re the one I’m worried about.”

“See you outside, Nova.”

They watched him disappear, leaving the cavern mostly dark save for the glow from the drill. Nova turned to the boy, the console reflecting off his bronze armor.

“So, Jack, ever drive one of these before?”

“Uh, no?”

“Well, it’s fairly simple. You see these levers?”
While Nova gave Jack a brief lesson on how to operate a drill, Mike went in search of the first signal. He switched off his light, instead using echolocation and infrared to see his way thru the cave. As he got closer to the spark signal he was tracking, he suddenly had to duck and roll behind a pile of rubble to avoid getting shot.

“Stop shooting! I’m here to help you!” he shouted.

“Yeah right, Deception!” a femme’s voice yelled back.

“I’m not a Decepticon!” Mike snapped. “As I told the human Jack, I’m with the CRC.”

The shooting stopped.

“Jack? You saw Jack? Is he alive? Is he alright? If you did anything to him…”

“Yes, I saw Jack.” Mike pushed up his mask and carefully stepped out from behind the rocks with his servos where Arcee could see them. “He seemed fine to me. I left him with my brother, Nova. They went looking for the other Autobot.”

“Bulkhead got trapped in the cave-in, too? I hope Miko’s ok.”

“What about you? Are you alright?”

All Mike could see was her blaster sticking out of a gap between two large rocks. As he moved closer, he glimpsed her optics beyond it, watching him intently.

“My pede is stuck under this boulder.” Her blaster tapped the rock to her right. “And I can’t get a good angle to try and move it.”

Mike hummed as his mask fell back into place and he inspected the huge chunk of stone. He disappeared from Arcee’s view as he moved around the stone. He came back a minute later.

“It would take someone like Kilo to move a rock this size. I’m going to have to cut it.” His left servo transformed into his laser drill. “Just sit tight and I’ll try to have you out soon.”

“Ok, Jack. There is a spark signal beyond this wall. Urge the drill forward slowly until I tell you to stop,” instructed Nova.

Jack pushed one lever just a little. The machine crawled forward, eating away at the wall. The drill was almost completely buried in the wall when Nova finally told him to stop. Pulling on the other lever, Jack backed up the drill and then turned it so he could see in the hole.

Nova didn’t even have to look in the hole to know who it was. The tell-tale red glow and the way the young boy on the drill froze up, it was definitely a Decepticon. The miner stayed beside the hole where he could not be seen by the Con.

“I suppose helping those less fortunate would be completely out of the question,” Megatron’s voice came from the hole. Jack took a step back, still too shocked to speak. “If that is the case, you might as well use your drill to finish me. I guarantee you will never have a better opportunity than right now.”

Jack’s expression turned uncertain as he glanced up at Nova. The miner silently shook his helm.
“Well, what are you waiting for?” Megatron asked as if he was not expecting such hesitation from the human. “Think of the glory. Seize the day. Optimus would.”

Jack frowned. “No, he wouldn’t,” he replied without a hint of doubt. “Not like this.” He looked up at Nova again. “Would you do it?”

Nova was surprised that the boy was asking him. “No,” he answered. “I would not.”

“Who is that?” Megatron demanded. “Who is with you?”

The miner quickly circled around the drill. “Come on, little one. Your friends are waiting.”

Jack shot one last glance at Megatron before he went back to the levers and started the drill after Nova.

“I will be sure to share the details of our little conversation with Optimus,” Megatron called after them. “The day I rip out his spark!”

After they were a good distance away, Jack halted the drill. Nova came around to check on him.

“Are you alright?”

“Did I do the right thing? Optimus wouldn’t have killed him, would he?”

“No. I really don’t believe he would have.” Nova carefully sat on the back edge of the drill. “You did the right thing, Jack.”

“Can I ask why you wouldn’t do it either?”

“Well, it’s--” Nova stood up suddenly. “Uh oh.”

“What?”

“The spark that left the mine earlier is back and it’s definitely not Mike. I have a bad feeling that it might be Starscream. It’s moving closer to the other one that hasn’t moved at all. Your friend might be in trouble.”

“Then let’s go!” Jack pushed the forward lever.

Nova hopped onto the back of the drill and held on as it rolled out.

“Hold up, Jack.” Nova laid a gentle servo on the boy’s shoulder. “I hear something.”

Jack halted the drill. Light filtered from an opening in the tunnel wall ahead of them and voices could be heard.

“That’s it, Autobot! I will-” Starscream started.

“What?” Bulkhead cut him off. “You’ll what? Make me bring down the ceiling on top of all of us?”

Nova stepped off the drill, motioned for Jack to wait, and went ahead to scope things out. He caught sight of Starscream first but as he moved closer he saw the big green Autobot was holding up a boulder easily the size of a human house. Miko was between Bulkhead’s pedes. Nova went
“Ok. When we go in,” he explained in a low voice, “you’ll want to aim a little to the left. You may hit Starscream, but that’s ok. We’ll grab the girl and then I want you to pull out and go that way.” He pointed past the opening. “Mike and Arcee are headed this way.”

“What about Bulkhead?”

“He’s kind of stuck at the moment. I will stay help him.”

“Run, Miko!” they heard Bulkhead order.

“Yes. Run, Miko,” Starscream taunted. “I would love to see you try. Really I would.”

“That’s our queue.”

Jack started the drill and drove it right into the hole as Nova instructed. It hit Starscream and knocked him aside. Bulkhead was surprised to see the drill but relieved to see Jack operating it. His relief was short lived when he spotted Nova behind the boy.

“More Decepticons?” he spat angrily.

“No, Bulkhead,” Jack assured him. “It’s ok. He’s with me.”

“Nova, CRC miner.” The mech knelt beside the drill and held a servo out to Miko. “Little one, you need to go with Jack. He will get you to safety.”

Miko clung to Bulkhead’s pede. “But, Bulk…”

“Will be alright. You, on the other hand, are running low on oxygen.”

“Hurry, Miko,” Jack urged. “Before Starscream gets up.”

“Go, Miko!” insisted Bulkhead.

Miko took a few steps toward the drill but stopped to look up at Bulkhead with tears on her face. Nova wasted no more time. He picked up the girl and deposited her on the drill with Jack.

“Remember, go left.”

The boy nodded and pulled the back lever. The drill crawled backward out of the hole just as Starscream came back online. Back out in the tunnel, Jack turned the drill to the left and pushed the forward lever.

“Will Bulk be ok with that mech? Where’s Arcee?” questioned Miko.

“We’re supposed to be meeting up with her if we head this way,” replied Jack. “Hopefully we can find them and get Bulkhead out of here before Megatron digs himself free.”

“Megatron’s down here too?” Miko squeaked.

“Don’t worry too much,” a voice spoke up nearby. “His spark signal hasn’t moved yet.”

“Mike. Arcee!” Jack halted the drill next to the pair that had just emerged from another tunnel.

“Where’s Bulkhead?” asked Arcee.
“Back that way.” Jack pointed. He looked up at Mike. “Nova’s with him. Starscream’s there too.”

“Wait here.”

The mech and femme hurried down the tunnel.

“You can’t be serious?” they heard Starscream whine as they approached the cavern.

“Dead serious.” Nova’s reply was icy. “Servos in the air. Now.”

They walked in to find Nova pointing a blaster at Starscream as he slowly raised his servos over his head. Bulkhead delicately lowered the boulder until Starscream took all of its weight. The thin seeker nearly wilted as the bulky mech slipped over to the entrance with the others.

“Hey, Bulk.”

“Hey, ‘Cee.”

“You can’t possibly leave me like this,” whimpered Starscream, his whole frame trembling under the heavy weight.

“Watch us,” Nova replied, turning on his heel. The Autobots followed him without a second glance.

“Don’t worry. Megatron is still in the mine. Maybe he’ll save you,” Mike jabbed before he left too.

“By the way, Jack, where did you learn to operate a Cybertronian drill?” Arcee asked.

The Cybertronians were in their alt-modes heading for the mine entrance with Mike and Nova leading the way. The Autobots were carrying their respective humans.

“Nova taught me,” Jack replied. “It was actually really easy to learn.”

“I’m sorry for getting you into this mess.”

“Don’t blame yourself, Arcee. I asked to come with you. Ah. Finally, daylight!” Jack exclaimed as the entrance came into view. “We’ve been stuck down here for hours.”

“Overnight actually. Good thing it’s the weekend.”

Jack checked his phone. It was just after seven in the morning. “That explains why I’m so hungry.”

The miners stopped and transformed once they reached the outside. The Autobots stopped and let their humans disembark before transforming.

“Whoa. You guys are shiny,” Miko observed.

“Thanks,” Mike said, turning to let the morning sun reflect off his copper plating better.

“You know you never did tell me why you couldn’t kill Megatron,” said Jack, looking up at Nova.

“Oh yeah. Well, it’s cause-” Nova suddenly flinched and put a servo to audial. Glancing over, he saw Mike doing the same.

“What’s wrong?” Jack asked, concerned.
“Hah. Well, we kinda left base without permission. And now we’re in trouble.”

“But hey, we had fun, right?” Mike clapped a servo on Nova’s shoulder.

“Yeah.” Nova smiled down at Jack. “Maybe we can hang out again sometime.”

A ground bridge portal opened nearby.

“That’s for us. See you around.” Mike casually saluted before he disappeared.

“You guys take care now.” Nova waved and disappeared into the portal as well.

Jack and Miko waved back as the portal closed.

“Well, thanks to them we got out.” Arcee looked toward the mine entrance. “And thanks to them, we could finish the Cons, here and now.”

“Yeah,” agreed Bulkhead. “Shame we didn’t bring any grenades.”

“Would Optimus finish them?” asked Jack.

“No. He probably wouldn’t. Not like this,” answered Arcee.

“But Optimus wouldn’t rescue them either, right?” added Miko.

“Let’s go home.” Bulkhead turned away and fell into vehicle mode, opening his door for Miko to climb in.

Arcee stared at the mine for a moment longer before she sighed and dropped to her tires as well.
Partners

In the Comm center, Echo looked up from his datapad when the computer beeped at him. The scanners had picked up an ancient Cybertronian energy signature. He set aside the datapad and called up the base’s archives on the computer. A quick scan of the archives provided him with a match. The signature was from the Harbinger, an old Decepticon transport ship that had crashed on Earth eons ago. According to the records, an Autobot battalion had shot it out of the sky.

Curious, Echo scanned the area for spark signals. An old, wrecked ship does not usually power up on its own after all. There were currently two Decepticon signals: Starscream and Airachnid. Echo wondered what they were looking for. If he recalled correctly, Starscream had already scouted that crash site when he had first come to Earth. Was there something that he missed?

The computer beeped again. Four Autobot signals had arrived in the area. Echo was wondering if he should contact the Madam when the commlink beeped.

“Speaking of…” he muttered as he reached over to answer it. “Yes, Madam?”

{Hey Echo. I’m gonna send you some coordinates. Can you tell me who is there?} The coordinates popped up on the monitor. {Got ’em?}

“Coordinates received. And I have already been observing them. I suppose you want to know who is there besides the Autobots?”

{Uh… Yeah. Why were you looking at them?}

“The Harbinger’s energy signature came up on our scanners. It was activated by Flyboy and Spinwheel.”

{Lovely.} She replied in that sarcastic manner of hers.

“Shall I send backup?”

{Yes. And someone to collect any remaining data from the ship. We might as well since they powered it up for us.}

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll see who is available and send them immediately.”

{Thanks, Echo. Keep me informed, ok?}

“Of course.”

There was an audible click as she terminated the link on her end. Echo called up the duty logs for the day to see who he could send. He picked three mechs from the off-duty list. He activated the base-wide comm.

“Tango, Romeo, Quebec. Please report to the receiving room.”

Echo stepped out of the Comm center. Somewhere in the base, twin engines revved. Moments later, Romeo and Tango came barreling out of one of the hallways. Tires sliding on the slick metal floor, they drifted across the main hall and raced toward the receiving room. Echo stepped out in front of them on purpose. The two cars slammed on their brakes and then transformed to try and stop faster. That just resulted in them in a pile at Echo’s pedes.
“Was that really necessary?” Romeo groaned as he tried to get up with Tango still sprawled across his back.

“Yes,” Echo replied, grabbing Tango’s servo and pulling him off Romeo. “You two know better than to race in the main hall.”

Tango apologized, “Sorry, Echo. We were just a little excited.”

“So, where are we going?” asked Romeo, finally on his pedes.

“We need to wait for Quebec to get here before I brief you.”

“I’m here,” said the two-toned blue flyer walking up to them.

“Allright. I picked the three of you because one: you were all available and two: Romeo is surveillance. Tango is good with computer. And, Que, you were the only flyer.”

“Great,” Quebec deadpanned.

“Airachnid and Starscream are looking for something at the crash site of the Harbinger. And most of Team Prime is there too. The Madam wants the information from the Harbinger. And for someone to keep an eye on the Autobots.”

“So I’m surveillance,” Romeo guessed.

“I’ll get the data.” Tango pulled a spare data drive from his subspace.

“And I’m backup,” Quebec sighed.

“Correct. I already sent the coordinates to Alfa. He is waiting to bridge you out.”

The trio bridged over close to the clearing where the Harbinger was buried but far enough away to avoid detection by any Bots or Cons.

“Seems they’re all underground at the moment,” commented Tango, reading the spark signals on his visor.

“Airachnid is on her way up,” corrected Romeo as he headed for the clearing.

He slipped thru the trees and ducked behind a large boulder near the clearing’s edge. The other two joined him in time to see Arcee pop out of a hole in the ground. She aimed her blaster around the clearing, searching for Airachnid. The spider-bot came bursting out of the ground under Arcee’s pedes, throwing her several feet.

“Arcee,” said Airachnid, transforming out of drill-mode. “So nice to see you again.”

The two-wheeler pushed herself up into a crouch. “I didn’t peg you for resigning with the Decepticons.” She activated her arm blades.

“A temporary arrangement, Arcee. You know I prefer working alone.” Airachnid dodged aside as Arcee launched herself at her.

“I’ll never understand why guys like girl fights so much,” Quebec commented out of the blue as they watched the two femmes fight.
“Huh?” The grounders threw him a couple of confused glances.

“I’m talking about humans but, I mean, look at them. They’re scary. And vicious. Could you imagine if the Madam was at least their size?”

They stared at him for a long moment, their processors testing the idea. It did not sit right with them.

“Don’t ever say anything like that again,” Tango shuddered.

“She is scary enough as it is,” added Romeo, shaking his helm.

“If she was that size, it might be easier to see her coming though.”

“Or not. She would still be fast.”

“At least she would be harder to miss.”

“That’s for sure.”

Blaster fire and helicopter blades brought them back to the situation at hand. Optimus was shooting at Airachnid as she flew away. As soon as she was out of range, he transformed his blaster back into his servo. Retracting his battle mask, he turned to the little blue femme with a stern glare.

“Arcee, you know better than to engage the enemy alone.”

“Not her. Not after what she did to Tailgate. She will pay!”

Disappointment bled into Optimus’ expression, as well as his voice. “Revenge will not bring back those we have lost. Is that understood?”

Instead of answering, Arcee closed her optics and turned away from him. Optimus was about to say something else to her when they were interrupted.

“Move it!”

Bulkhead and Bumblebee had finally resurfaced with a Decepticon prisoner in tow. Starscream was tied up in Airachnid’s webbing and walking in front of them.

“No need to use force,” the seeker whined. Bulkhead decided otherwise and shoved him hard. Starscream stumbled and fell on his knees in front of Optimus and Arcee. “I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

“Is that right?” Bulkhead scoffed. “And what do you want in return?”

“I want be on your side,” Starscream said, looking hopefully up at Prime.

“Huh. Who knew that a Decepticon could pull off such a good puppy dog look,” said Quebec.

“I bet Bumblebee could do it better,” Tango pointed out.

“I bet you would like to see Knock Out try to pull it off, Tango,” commented Romeo, elbowing him.

“Hm. Yes, but I am sure he reserves that look for Breakdown.”
“Hey, Tango. Since the wreckage is clear, want to go down and get what we came for?” asked Quebec.

“Yeah. Let’s go,” Tango agreed. He turned to Romeo. “You’ve got this up here, right?”

“Of course. This is what I do.”

“Comm me if you need backup,” advised Quebec.

Romeo nodded. Tango and Quebec’s visors flickered and turned red. The two mechs were gone from behind the rock in a second. They circled the clearing and accessed the Harbinger via the same hole in the ground that the Autobots had used. Once inside the ship, they paused, their visors going back to orange.

“The nearest computer terminal is….?” Tango scanned the hallway to the right.

“This way.” Quebec pointed, having scanned the hallway to the left.

Tango followed him down the dark hall. They came to a junction with a wider hallway and there was the terminal, its many monitors still active from when Airachnid used it.

“Jackpot!” Approaching the terminal, Tango pulled out the spare data drive and plugged it into the access port.

The computer beeped in acknowledgement and commenced with the data transfer.

“Half the ship is missing,” commented Quebec as he finished scanning the wreckage while Tango accessed the search logs.

“Seems the Cons were looking a piece of cargo,” Tango spoke as he typed. “Ah, here it is. An experimental prototype weapon called the Immobilizer. It was located in Section 23. And since neither of the Decepticons had it….”

“It would be safe to assume it is on the other half of the ship.” Quebec folded his arms over his chassis. “That would explain why Airachnid left. But do we know where the other half is?”

“It’s not in the logs, obviously. Starscream probably knows.”

Quebec put a digit to his comm. “Romeo, has Flyboy said anything about the other half of the Harbinger?”

{Actually, yes. He just told the Autobots that that is where Spin-wheel was headed. He has offered to show them the way.}

“We could contact Echo. Have him locate Spin-wheel and possible the coordinates of the other half-”

{Where’s the fun in that? It’s not like it’s an emergency.}

“Not yet.” Tango joined the comm. “But from what I just read about the weapon Spin-wheel is looking for, we don’t want it to fall into Decepticon servos.”

{Yeah. Flyboy was a little sketchy of the details. What is it and what does it do?}

“The Immobilizer. And as the name suggests, it immobilizes using a stasis beam to cause instant
stasis lock.”

{Yeaaah. That doesn’t sound pleasant.}

“No, it doesn’t,” added Quebec quietly as he read the monitor with the information about the weapon.

{Oh scrap, that’s got to be uncomfortable.}

“What is it?”

{The Bots just put a clamp on Flyboy’s wings so that if he slips out of the cuffs he still can’t transform.}

Tango glanced over in time to see Quebec twitch. Even though his wings were situated differently than Starscream’s, as a fellow flyer, Quebec felt sorry for the Con being grounded.

“How is he going to show them the way then?” Tango asked.

{He’s giving them directions and they’re stuffing him in Optimus’ trailer.}

“Seriously? That’s just messed up.”

{And they’re rolling out. I’m going too.}

Alright,” replied Tango. “We’ll catch up with you when the download is complete. It shouldn’t be too much longer.”

{Roger that. Let me know when you are on your way.} The link disconnected.

“The download is barely halfway complete,” countered Quebec.

“Yeah, but he didn’t need to know that. If you don’t want to wait, I don’t mind if you go ahead.”

“And leave you down here by yourself? I don’t think so.”

Tango shrugged. “It’s up to you.”

Romeo followed after the Autobots at a safe distance as they drove to the place that Starscream had said Airachnid was going. They remained on his scanners but he was far enough back that they couldn’t see him. He was not particularly pleased with going off-road in the desert with his alt. His low-hanging frontend kept catching on rocks and he would grimace every time one scraped his undercarriage.

Ahead of him, the Autobots stopped. He slowed down and adjusted his course so that he could get closer to them while using the numerous rock formations as cover. As he got closer, he transformed and continued on foot to avoid engine noise. He stopped when he could not get any closer at regular speed without being seen. From there, he could see the Autobots and Starscream but he was too far away to hear them.

“Here goes nothing,” Romeo said as his visor flickered from orange to red.

There was a rock formation next to the stone arch that they were looking for. It was a perfect
hiding place that would allow Romeo to see and hear everything. He went for it, passing so close to
the Autobots that he could have reached out and poked Bulkhead. Once he was situated behind the
rocks, his visor flickered back to orange.

Prime’s long drawn out words returned to normal speed. “-with me. Arcee, remain with our
prisoner.”

Arcee glanced at Starscream while Optimus turned to leave with Bulkhead and Bumblebee.

“Optimus, please,” Arcee said, hurrying after him.

Optimus turned back around and looked down at her.

“For Tailgate!” she insisted.

“Your desire to avenge Tailgate will only continue to cloud your judgement,” Optimus replied.

Prime and the others left Arcee with Starscream, disappearing into the canyon beyond the arch.
Romeo remained where he was. He wasn’t so sure it was a great idea to leave the femme alone
with the seeker.

Arcee turned back to Starscream. He was on his knees, cuffed and struggling to adjust his wings.

“Ugh. Is the clamp really necessary?” Starscream whined. “I promise not to fly away. It’s really
giving me a crick.”

Arcee moved over to stand in front of him, servos on her hips.

“I can shove you back in the trailer.”

Starscream let out a disappointed groan.

Neither of them spoke again for a several minutes and Arcee began to pace. Romeo was getting
bored.

“I’m not really so bad, you know,” Starscream spoke up after a while. “Megatron. He’s the evil
one.”

Arcee stopped pacing. “Tell it to someone who cares.”

“Like whom? Airachnid? What I wouldn’t do to get my servos around her wretched throat.”

“So we can agree on one thing.” Arcee rested her servo on her hip.

“Oh, you have no idea. She showed up one day and the next thing you know she’s acting like she
runs the place.” Starscream waved his cuffed servos around as he spoke. “She whispered lies into
Megatron’s audial. Maneuvered to rob me of my rightful place.”

“Well,” Arcee looked away in anger, “she terminated my partner.”

“What?” Starscream gasped. “She’s taking credit for scraping him now too? That was my doing.”

“What?” asked Arcee. “You weren’t there.”

Starscream instantly realized his mistake. “O-of course I wasn’t. I don’t know what I was
thinking.”
“Who were you talking about?” Arcee demanded, stepping closer to him.

“No one.” Starscream tried to sound innocent. “Who were you talking about?”

“Tailgate.”

“Who’s Tailgate?” asked Starscream in confusion.

Arcee’s optics widen in realization. “You were the one. You extinguished Cliffjumper!”

“Cliffjumper?” Starscream practically shrieked, realizing that he was a dead mech the way she was glaring at him.

Arcee pulled back her fist and activated her arm blade.

“No. No, no. You misunderstand,” cried Starscream, raising his servos in a weak attempt to pacify her. “It wasn’t like you think. The troopers mortally wounded him.” He latched onto her other arm. “I was trying to help Cliffjumper. Put him out of his misery. He begged me to!”

Arcee yelled in anger. Frightened, Starscream let go of her arm. She kneed him in the chassis and knocked him on his back. He quickly sat up. Arcee loomed over him again.

“Okay. Okay,” he cried, holding out his servos. “It was a mistake. I’ve made many.” Pleading, he got to his knees. “But I’ve changed. You wouldn’t terminate a defenseless prisoner, would you?”

Glaring, Arcee took a couple steps back. There was a tense moment of silence. Starscream gazed up at her, optics still pleading. She responded by pulling a key out her subspace and throwing in the dirt before him.

“What? What is that?”

“The key to your cuffs.”

“What for?”

“Cliff would’ve given you a fighting chance.”

“No. Please.” He pulled back. “I don’t want to. What’s past is past. I’m one of you now.”

Arcee brought out both her blasters and aimed at him. He shrank away crying ‘no, no’.

“Take it!” she ordered.

Hesitantly, Starscream reached out and picked up the key. He barely held on and ended up dropping it. He gasped and pulled back again.

“You’re pathetic,” Arcee said.

She transformed one of her blasters back into a servo and reached down to pick up the key. Starscream smirked and readied his claws, striking when she least expected it. Arcee gasped in pain and staggered back. Starscream picked up the key and unlocked his cuffs. Acree looked down at the wounds in her side and collapsed to her knees.

“Something wrong, Arcee?” Starscream asked, standing over her. “I thought you wanted a fight.”

Romeo had seen enough. He didn’t doubt that Arcee could still defend herself but he felt it was
necessary to step in now. Activating his blasters, he stepped out of his hiding place and fired. The shot hit Starscream’s shoulder guard and sent him spinning.

Starscream stumbled to keep his pedes and whipped his helm around to find out where the shot had come from. A dark red mech, a grounder by looks of him, was coming toward them, both blasters trained on the seeker. The strangest thing about him was his vehicon mask due to his lack of an insignia, Decepticon or otherwise.

“Touch her again and I’ll blow you away, flyboy,” he snapped.

“Who are you?” demanded Starscream, stepping away from Arcee.

“No one of consequence. Now get out of here before I change my mind about scrapping you.”

“Wha-”

Romeo fired a blast at the ground by the Starscream’s pedes. “Scram!”

Starscream did not waste any time. He turned and ran away as fast as he could. Blasters returning to servos, Romeo watched him and then turned his attention to Arcee, who sat back with a sigh. He pushed his mask up as he knelt beside her.

“Why did you let him go?” she asked, pulling away when he tried to examine her wounds.

He looked her in optics as he spoke. “With the Well of Allsparks dark, every spark extinguished reduces our race by one, so the CRC have vowed not to take another Cybertronian’s life unless absolutely necessary.”

Arcee stared at him for a long moment before looking away with something akin to shame. This mech, whom she figured was CRC from the start, was right, though she did not want to admit it.

“Unfortunately I am not skilled enough to fix you properly,” he said, looking closely at her wounds while she was distracted by her thoughts. “I can apply a field patch but you’ll need to see a real medic soon.”

Just then Bumblebee returned alone. He beeped in alarm at the scene and pointed his blasters at the Romeo.

“Whoa! Hey!” Romeo exclaimed, raising his servos. “I’m just trying to help. Starscream’s the one who hurt her.”

“Bumblebee! Where’s Optimus and Bulkhead?” asked Arcee, ignoring Romeo.

Deactivating his blasters, Bumblebee explained what happened.

“They’ve been frozen by a weapon called the Immobilizer? Does Airachnid still have it?”

Bumblebee shook his helm and said that he broke it so Airachnid couldn’t use it anymore.

“Show me where they are,” Arcee said, attempting to stand.

When she dropped back to her knees for the second time, Romeo simply scooped her up bridal style and started walking.

“H-hey! Put me down!” Arcee cried, flustered and struggling.
“Why? You can barely stand in your condition,” Romeo said, smirking slightly.

Bumblebee beeped his agreement with Romeo as he walked beside them. Arcee huffed and gave up.

Liliy and Ratchet waited by the computers for someone to comm. Optimus had informed them when he came back to get his trailer that they had captured Starscream and he was leading them to where Airachnid had gone. That was some time ago. The comm finally beeped.

“Optimus?” asked Ratchet.

{No, Ratchet. It’s me. We kinda need some backup. The Cons are gone but Optimus and Bulkhead are in stasis lock and Arcee is injured.}

“I’ll be right there, Bumblebee.” The medic locked on their coordinates and opened a bridge. He turned to Liliy.

She understood his silent question. “Just go, Ratchet. I know what to do.”

Ratchet went thru the ground bridge and was surprised to see the unknown bot.

“Who are you?” he asked harshly as he hurried to Arcee’s side.

“I’m sorry. Where are my manners? I haven’t introduced myself yet. My name is Romeo. I am a member of the CRC surveillance team. I was instructed to provide your team with assistance.”

"The CRC? So you finally decided to show yourselves."

“Finally? We’ve help you many times since the first time you guys encountered MECH.”

Just then, Romeo’s comm link crackled. {Tango to Romeo. We’re headed to your location. What’s your status?}

"Yeah. Hey, Tango. Cover blown. Third Wheel is injured but Hands is here. Honey is fine but Red Leader and Face appear to be in stasis lock from the Immobilizer. And also, Flyboy is now a free bird."

{Roger that, Romeo. Do you need additional assistance?}

“Stand by.” He looked over at Ratchet. “Do you want more help to carry your friends back to base?”

The medic looked unsure. He glanced at Arcee and Bumblebee. They both shrugged. He sighed.

“Fine. But you have to leave immediately afterwards, understood?”

“Understood.” To Tango, “Yeah. We could use a little help.”

{Roger that. ETA: five minutes.}

“See you when you get here. Romeo out.”
Five minutes later, a small, propeller driven airplane dropped out of the sky. Quebec transformed mid fall and landed on his pedes. A moment later, a little, orange sports car came racing around a bend in the canyon and transformed. Both of them pushed their masks up.

“I thought you said Ratchet and Arcee were here?” asked Tango.

“They went back to their base already because of Arcee’s injury,” explained Romeo.

“Oh.” Tango went over to Bumblebee. “Hey there. My name’s Tango. I don’t know if you remember but I’m the one who saved you from Knock Out when you went street racing a while back.”

“What?” cried Romeo. “You went street racing without me?”

“Hush, Romeo. You were in recharge at the time.”

“Yes I remember,” Bumblebee chirped. He held out a servo. “Thanks for that.”

With a smile, Tango shook his servo. “You’re welcome.”

“And, hey, if you ever feel like racing again,” Romeo draped an arm over Tango’s shoulders, “send us a comm. We’d love to see what you can do.”

Quebec clapped his servos. “Alright, speedsters. Enough flirting. Let’s get these mechs moved before the sun goes down.”

Bumblebee requested a ground bridge and then helped Quebec carry Prime. Romeo and Tango followed carrying Bulkhead. They left the stiff Bots standing in the medbay.

“Ask Liliy to send you wherever you want to go. I have work to do,” said Ratchet, shooing the three CRCs away.

“Over here,” Liliy called to them.

They joined her by the ground bridge controls.

“Hey little lady, mind sending us someplace up north?” asked Romeo.

“Sure thing.” She turned to the computer. “Quebec?”

“Yes?” Quebec replied, not realizing she was referring to the Canadian province.

Liliy couldn’t help but laugh. “No. I mean is the Quebec Province a good place to send you?”

“Oh. Yes. That’s fine.”

The bridge whirled to life.

“Thanks, miss,” Romeo said, winking at her.

“Yeah. Thanks,” said Tango with a casual salute.

Quebec simply nodded at her before they disappeared. Liliy stared after them wishing that they had been able to stay longer, but that might’ve blown her cover. She looked over to watch Ratchet work and sighed. She wasn’t sure how much longer she could keep up this charade. She was going to have to tell the Autobots sooner or later. Sighing again, she turned back to the computer. It
wasn’t going to be today. Ratchet already had enough to worry about as it was.
It was a lazy afternoon. Liliy agreed to join Miko and Bulkhead to watch a monster truck rally on TV. Miko sat on the coffee table to get a better view of the television. Liliy lounged behind her on the couch with Bulkhead at her back. One of the monster trucks on the screen ran over a pile of smaller vehicles and landed on another car, crushing it.

“Oooh!” cried Bulkhead. He covered his face with his servo and shook his helm, slightly disturbed.

“Huyah! Munched!” Miko shouted at the screen.

Bulkhead peeked thru his digits and then removed his servo when Miko turned to look at him with an excited smile.

“Give it up for the baddest beast machines on the planet!” the announcer said.

“Would you mind lowering the volume?” Ratchet asked from the main console.

“Hey, Ratch. Check out the monster truck rally Miko took me to last week,” said Bulkhead.

Miko pulled out her phone and held it high. “I compiled some highlights with my cellphone.”

Ratchet walked over to where he could see the TV. “Innocent vehicles battling for pleasure of human spectators.” He shuddered. “Blood sport.”

“Yeah!” All three in front of the TV cheered.

“You could be helping Optimus in the field right now,” Ratchet said to Bulkhead.

“Ah. He doesn’t need my help to search for some ancient educational thingamabob,” replied Bulkhead, waving it off.

Ratchet shook his helm. “The thingamabob to which you refer happens to a Cybertronian data cylinder.” He pressed a button on the console and the cylinder data displayed on the TV.

“Hey!” cried Miko.

“Aww!” Bulkhead whined.

“Ratchet! We were watching that!” Even Liliy was annoyed.

“And there is no telling what vast intelligence it may hold,” continued Ratchet, ignoring their protests. He accessed the information on the computer. “During the golden age, dozens of these cylinders were created. Each containing the sum total of Cybertronian knowledge on any given subject. Stellar cartography. Medicine. Ancient mythology. When the war broke out, the cylinders were hidden throughout the galaxies to keep them as far as possible from Decepticon reach. Detecting one signal here, on Earth, is the opportunity of a-”

“Ah! T.M.I., dude,” interrupted Miko.

“Switch it back! I wanna see the ho-down show-down!” insisted Bulkhead.

The commlink beeped. It was Optimus.
“Backup is what I’m built for,” stated Bulkhead, getting to his pedes. He smashed his fist into his palm and headed for the ground bridge as Ratchet activated it.

“Go bend some fenders, Bulk,” Miko encouraged, following him halfway down the stairs.

“I have an important mission for you too, Miko,” Ratchet said, moving over to the stairs.

“Really?” she asked excitedly.

Much to her disappointment, he handed her a mop. She took it with a sigh and he turned away with a satisfied smile. And then, the moment his back was turned, the mop was rolling down the stairs and Miko was heading for the still open portal.

Liliy had gotten up while Ratchet had been rambling and started fiddling with the TV. She was too focused to notice Bulkhead leaving. The channel finally changed back.

“Ah ha! Got it! Hey Mi--ko...” Miko was disappearing thru the ground bridge when Liliy looked up. Liliy frowned and muttered, “Humans...”

With a sigh, she turned off the TV and went over to the main console.

“Ratchet.”

He looked at her when she said his name.

“I know they’re a whole lot smaller than you but don’t you ever notice when they go missing?”

“What do you mean?”

The commlink beeped again.

{Ratchet. Come in.} Miko sounded out of breath.

“That’s what I mean.” Liliy gestured to the console.

“Miko?” asked Ratchet. “This is an emergency channel. Where are you?”

{Doi. I’m with the thingamabob.} she answered amid the sounds of battling robots.

“Thingam- The data cylinder?”

{Yes! Can you bridge it outta here?}

“I’ll reactivate arrival coordinates.” He moved over to the ground bridge controls and reopened the portal.

{Dude! Can you open it any closer?}

“Supply coordinates.”

{Um... Fifty yards.}

“Precise coordinates!”
Liliy rolled her eyes. “I’ll go look, Ratchet.”

“What? Liliy, wait!”

But she was already gone. She made it to the cylinder in time to echo Ratchet’s ‘wait!’ as Miko jump-kicked it to try and get it to move. Liliy just stood there with her hand covering her face as the cylinder activated while everyone else who noticed it kind of freaked out.

Bulkhead broke off fighting with Breakdown because he was worried about Miko. The Con knocked him down from behind and he fell right in front of the cylinder. An energy beam shot out of the cylinder and right into Bulkhead’s helm. When it stopped, Bulkhead fainted.

“Bulk!” Miko cried, running over to him.

Liliy put herself between Miko and the cylinder as Knock Out approached them.

“You really took one for the team, Bulkhead,” he said, picking up the cylinder. “My team!”

A ground bridge opened behind him and he turned and ran through it. Breakdown followed but the portal closed before the eradicons could make it so they had to transform and fly away.

Bulkhead stirred as the other Autobots gathered around him. He got to his pedes.

“Bulkhead, are you-” Optimus started.

“Fine,” Bulkhead cut him off. “It didn’t even smart.”

The other Bots sighed in relief. Bulkhead looked down at Miko.

“But, Miko, what are you doing here?”

“I was just trying help,” she huffed.

“I was just trying help,” she huffed.

“Don’t look at me like that, Optimus.” Liliy glared up at the Prime who regarded her with a little disappointment. “I came thru to help Miko after she requested a ground bridge from Ratchet. I knew what I was doing.” Pulling out her phone, she muttered, “I’m harder to kill than you think.” Into her phone, “Hey, Ratchet. We lost the cylinder. Can we come back now?”

Once everyone was back at base, Optimus ordered Ratchet to examine Bulkhead. Then he and the other Autobots went out scouting with the hope of relocating the cylinder. Miko, of course, stayed by her guardian’s side. Liliy stayed in the medbay as well. She was curious about what happened to Bulkhead.

“I helped lose that thing,” complained Bulkhead as he sat on the med berth with some wires attached to his helm. “I wanna help find it.” He stood up from the berth. “I need to get back in the field with Optimus.”

“Ahp, ahp.” Ratchet laid a servo on Bulkhead’s shoulder, gently pushing him back. “You’re under my watch now. Optimus’ orders.”

Bulkhead reluctantly sat back on the berth.

“And running a full scan of your neural net would be a wiser use of your time.” Ratchet turned back to his monitors.
Bulkhead reached up and pulled the wires from his helm. “Come on, doc. There’s nothing up there to scan.” He got off the berth again.

“He seems fine to me,” added Miko.

“Uugh. Well, if you insist on making yourself useful.” Ratchet reached down and retrieved something from the floor. “You can help Miko and Liliy tidy up.” The something was the mop from earlier. He handed it Bulkhead and went back to the monitors.

“Uuhn. He’s mad with power,” whined Miko.


“What?” Miko looked up at him confused.

“Hey, we got any paint around here?” Bulkhead asked, spinning the mop between his digits.

“Art project? Cool!” Miko said excitedly. She jumped down from the berth and ran out of the medbay with Bulkhead trailing after her.

Liliy watched them go and sighed. So much for finding out what happened. And she went in search of a broom.

Liliy never found a broom. Instead, she got distracted by all the dust in one of the back rooms. She was cleaning that up when her sensors picked up the ground bridge activating. Curious, Liliy hurried back out to the main room.

Everyone was gathered in the medbay with Bulkhead back on the berth, wires connected to his helm again.

“This hot spot you see here,” Ratchet was saying as he gestured to the red spot on the scan of Bulkhead’s neural net on the monitor, “it’s information. Data. Living energy.”

“Hold on,” Miko interrupted. “It’s alive. It’s on fire. And it’s in Bulkhead’s brain?” She pointed at her own head with both hands.


“Based on what we witnessed during our skirmish,” Optimus said, “the living data must have been programmed to eject when it sensed unauthorized access.”

“A security measure,” realized Ratchet.

“It would’ve jettisoned heavenward,” continued Optimus. “Lost to the stars.”

“Except my fat engine block got in the way,” Bulkhead said as he sat up on the berth.

“Every Con there made a grab for it, but the cylinder doesn’t go off until Miko and Liliy touch it?” asked Arcee.

“It was all Miko,” Liliy informed her. “I never touched it.”
“Hm. The cylinders originated from Cybertron’s Golden Age,” said Ratchet, bring up the information on the monitor, “predating the Autobot/Decepticon division.”

“So it wouldn’t consider any native of Cybertron to be a threat,” added Optimus.

“Only alien life forms, such as humans,” confirmed Ratchet.

“So then, are we staring at genius?” asked Arcee, gesturing to the symbols on the wall next to her. “Or gibberish?”

“I do not wish to falsely rally anyone’s hopes,” said Ratchet, “but these equations appear to be the formula for a synthetic energon.”

Liliy turned from studying the glyphs to stare at Ratchet in shock. Optimus had a similar look of surprise. Bumblebee pumped his fist in the air, beeping and buzzing excitedly.

“We hit the motherload,” Arcee agreed with him.

“Miko, do you understand what this means?” Bulkhead turned to the girl happily.

“Umm?” Miko wasn’t sure.

“Energon provides our fuel, our ammo, our life force,” he explained to her. “With the natural stuff in such short supply here on Earth, this could solve a whole lot of problems.”

“Such as providing us with edge we need to turn the tide of this war,” suggested Prime.

“Or handing us the key to revitalizing Cybertron,” Ratchet added.

“We got the goods and all Megatron got was an empty bucket,” said Arcee.

“How often do I get to use my noggin to save the day?” joked Bulkhead.

Sometime later, while Bulkhead was painting bits of the formula on metal panels instead of the walls, Ratchet quietly asked Optimus to join him in the medbay. Curious, Arcee and Bumblebee followed, bringing a completed panel with them for Ratchet to log. Liliy was sitting on the second tier behind Ratchet’s monitor so she could see what he was doing.

Ratchet brought up the previous scan of Bulkhead’s helm. “This is Bulkhead’s neural net as you saw it earlier,” he explained. He switched it to a new scan that showed the red spreading. “This scan was recorded just minutes ago. It is as I feared. The data seems to be actively and aggressively rewriting Bulkhead’s neural net. I had hoped he was purging the data, but he is merely transcribing it as it-”

“Consumes his mind,” Optimus finished for him.

“From all indications,” Ratchet continued. “By the time Bulkhead completes the formula, his own thoughts, his memories, could be wiped clean.”

“But if we stop him,” said Arcee. “Goodbye synthetic energon.”

“You assume we possess a means of stopping him,” replied Ratchet. “I don’t exactly have instant access to the wisdom of the ancients.”
“I will not allow another one of our own to be sacrificed. No matter the cost,” said Optimus.

Liliy got up at moved to the rail to the side of the monitor so she could see Ratchet better. “I’m sure we can get it out of Bulkhead the same way it got in. We just need something to hold it. Like the original cylinder.”

Ratchet looked thoughtful. “I suppose that could work.”

“How are we supposed to get it back from the Decepticons?” asked Arcee.

“Megatron will bring it to us,” stated the Prime.

“Great. Love the idea.” Liliy was now perched on top of the rail. “But who is going to tell Miko?”

The Bots stared at her. Then Ratchet and Optimus shared a look.

“You’re not going to tell her, are you?” Liliy asked, guessing their silent communications.

“It is best that she doesn’t know at this time, Liliy. Not until after we get the cylinder.”

“But she is going to figure out on her own eventually. She is smarter than you give her credit for sometimes,” Liliy argued. “And besides, what if Megatron doesn’t give you the cylinder? What then?”

“If that happens, we will seek out another option.” Optimus turned to Ratchet. “Please rig a transponder with the data signal so that we can get the Decepticons’ attention.”

After Optimus left with Arcee and Bumblebee, Liliy sat quietly in her previous spot, recording the bits of formula as Ratchet logged them. She heard Miko moving around and trying to get Bulkhead’s attention with her bass playing. She heard them conversing but she don’t bother to listen close enough to make it out. Miko ran up the stairs and to the railing above Ratchet’s monitor.

“Ratch, I think Bulk’s losing his mind,” Miko said.

Ratchet looked up at her, startled.

“You already know,” Miko realized.

Ratchet glanced down at Liliy who gave him the ‘I told you so’ look. He put a servo a top his monitor as he leaned slightly forward and spoke gently.

“Miko, we didn’t want to frighten you. But, rest assured, Optimus has a plan.”

“By no means foolproof either,” muttered Liliy.

Ratchet ignored her.

“Optimus isn’t Bulkhead’s doctor,” replied Miko, not hearing Liliy. “I just need to know. When Bulk’s done spitting out that formula, he’ll go back to being regular old Bulkhead, right?”

Ratchet closed his mouth and looking down without answering. But his reaction was answer enough for her. Miko turned away from the railing, shoulders drooping sadly. She went back down the stairs to talk to Bulkhead. She wanted to know how much of his memory he had lost. It took her
a few minutes for to come up with something to ask him.

“Bulkhead,” she finally spoke, “do you remember the time Wheeljack launched his only grenade into the Decepticon heat exchanger?”

“Who?” Bulkhead asked without looking up from his work.

“Wheeljack!” Miko pulled out her phone and flipped it open. The picture on her home screen was the one she took of Bulkhead and Wheeljack before the Wrecker left. She held the phone out so Bulkhead could see. “Your best bud! Besides me, of course.”

Bulkhead looked at the picture for a moment before going back to painting. There was no recognition in his optics.

“Oooh!” Miko hesitantly asked the question she feared the answer to. “Do you even know who I am?”

“Of course,” Bulkhead replied, looking up at her again. “You’re….” His optics narrowed in thought but he could not find the answer.

Miko’s hopeful smile faded fast as Bulkhead went back to muttering the formula as he painted it on the panel. Ratchet took the finished panel.

“Keep them coming, Bulkhead.” He carried the panel to the medbay to log it.

Liliy’s head jerked up when she heard the ground bridge activate. Ratchet seemed too buried in his work to notice. Liliy quickly got up in time to see Bulkhead follow Miko into the portal.

“Slagit, Miko,” she muttered in annoyance as she went after them.

They came out in the monster truck stadium. Liliy recognized it from the TV. Bulkhead immediately went to the nearest vertical surface and continued to transcribe the formula where he left off. With him outside the shielding of the base, it was far more likely that Optimus’ plan would fail. Liliy pulled out her phone.

“Alfa, I need a favor.”

At the negotiations for the cylinder, nobody expected a strange mech to suddenly drop out of the sky, much less to punch Megatron in the face. But that is how Alfa arrived.

Landed in the valley with a resounding thud, Alfa took some satisfaction in the fact that Megatron, the great Decepticon warlord that he once had to look up to, now had to look up at him when he straightened right in front of him. He grabbed hold of the cylinder and drew back his fist. Punched Megatron in the face before he could react. Megatron let go of the cylinder as he crashed to the ground.

A ground bridge opened next to Alfa at his command and he disappeared through it before the eradicons gathered their wits enough to attack him. On the other side, back at the CRC base, he handed the cylinder off to Tango. Then he redirected the bridge to Liliy’s coordinates for the orange mech.
Liliy stuck to the shadows when Knock Out and Breakdown showed up. Miko led Bulkhead off to hide outside the stadium.

“It’s not like Bulkhead to run from a fight,” commented Breakdown.

“I’m afraid our friend has had a little too much to think,” replied Knock Out as they crossed the stadium to go after them.

Outside, they found the enclosed parking lot where all the monster trucks were kept.

“Ok then.” Knock Out looked around the lot. “Fun and games.”

The Cons split up, each taking a different lane to search for Bulkhead.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” Knock Out singsonged.

Smirking, Liliy zipped over to Knock Out as he was taking a step. She grabbed the side of his planted ped and jerked as she moved forward. His pedes swept out from under him and he cried out as he fell on his back.

“Knock Out, are you ok?” Breakdown asked, quickly coming over to him.

“Yeah. Just help me up.” Knock Out held up a servo.

Before Breakdown could help him, Liliy tripped the blue mech causing him to fall on top of the sports car Con. She giggled at their tangle of arms and legs as they tried to get up before running off to find Miko.

“Miko!” she whisper-shouted, catching the girl under one of the taller trucks.

“Liliy! What are you doing here?” the girl asked.

“I followed you from base obviously. What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to call for backup,” she said, holding up her phone, “but they’re jamming the signal.”

“Let me try.” Liliy pulled out her phone and dialed the base. The call went through. “Ratchet, hey.”

{Liliy? Where are you?}

“The monster truck stadium. I followed Miko and Bulkhead when they snuck out and now we’re hiding from Doc Knock and his partner. We could really use some help.”

{Hold on. I’ll call the others right away.}

“Hurry.” Liliy hung up the phone as she and Miko ran to hide behind another truck.

Knock Out and Breakdown managed to untangle themselves and get back to their pedes.

“I think that’s enough fun for tonight,” the Con medic grumbled as he pulled a scanner out of his subspace. “Time to end this game.” He followed the scanner’s beeping to where Bulkhead was parked. “I think I’m warm.”

Bulkhead transformed and spouted more of the formula before painting a symbol on the nearest flat surface: Knock Out’s chassis.
Knock Out was livid. “You painted my paint job! Prepare for surgery!” he growled.

Bulkhead turned in time to get a face full of Breakdown’s fist. The green mech went down, out cold. Knock Out and Breakdown stood over him triumphantly.

Liliy felt Tango’s spark getting closer. She finally spotted him moving across the parking lot toward them as Knock Out was preparing to take off Bulkhead’s helm.

“Miko,” Liliy said to the girl who was watching the scene unfold with growing horror. She didn’t seem to hear. Liliy grabbed her shoulder to get her attention. “Miko, you can stop this. You can save him.”

“How?” Miko cried.

“Just run over there and hit Bulkhead on the helm. The data should leave him just like it did when you kicked the cylinder.” She gave her a little push. “Go. I’ll be right behind you.”

Face full of determination, Miko ran forward and slammed both fists on the top of Bulkhead’s helm. Bulkhead’s optics shot open, glowing red with the data energy. A split second later, Tango was there, catching the escaping data with the cylinder. Knock Out and Breakdown backed off at the sudden release of energy.

When the data transfer was complete, Bulkhead’s optics closed. Tango disappeared with the full cylinder faster than he had appeared. Knock Out got up and scanned Bulkhead.

“Dead battery,” he grumbled to Breakdown. “Megatron is going to peel our paint for losing that data.”

“Did you see that mech?” asked Breakdown, only half listening. “He looked familiar.”

A ground bridge opened and the other Autobots arrived.

“It doesn’t matter because it’s time to peel out of here,” said Knock Out.

The Cons busted thru the nearest wall, transformed, and sped off into the night.

A few miles out, Knock Out and Breakdown were still racing down the road because they did not want to return to the Nemesis just yet to face Megatron’s wrath. They drove side by side, just enjoying the night.

“The new paint looks good on you, by the way,” a voice said on Knock Out’s other side.

Startled, Knock Out slammed on his brakes and swerved away from the voice only to bump into Breakdown. The pair ended up sideways in the middle of the road. An orange car rolled up to them with an amused engine rumble.

“You again?” snapped Knock Out, recognizing the newcomer.

“Up for another race?” Tango asked innocently. “Maybe your friend can referee this one so we can have a clean race. What do you say?”

“I’m not really in the mood.” Knock Out started rolling away.

“It’s just as well. You’d probably lose the race just like you lost the data tonight.”
Knock Out braked hard. “What did you just say?”

“You heard me.”

“Breakdown, drive exactly one mile down this road and stop. Flash your lights so we know when to start.”

“You’re going to regret challenging him,” Breakdown rumbled to Tango before going off follow Knock Out’s orders.

“I doubt losing a clean race could be any worse than getting shot in the rear end,” said Tango.

“I’ll do it again if I have to,” Knock Out commented.

“Do you even know the definition of a clean race?”

“Decepticon. I can claim it’s not in my vocabulary.”

“I could still beat with just my nose,” Tango said, lining up next to Knock Out.

“So could I.” Knock Out’s engine revved in anticipation.

Breakdown’s lights flashed in the distance. Squealing tires spun on the pavement and the roar of their engines filled the night. As quickly as it started, it was over; Knock Out winning by a nose.

After they stopped, Knock Out transformed. Breakdown rolled up to them and transformed as well. Knock Out put his servos on his hips.

“I won fair and square this time. You have to tell me your name.”

Tango transformed. His mask sat crooked on top of his helm.

Breakdown gasped. “You were one of the mechs that saved me.”

“Saved you?” Knock out asked, confused. He looked up at his partner. “Breakdown, what are you talking about?”

Tango lifted an optic ridge. “You didn’t tell him?”

“No.”

“Tell me what?” Knock Out looked back and forth between them.

“I didn’t escape from the humans by myself,” answered Breakdown. He gestured to Tango. “I was rescued by this guy and his buddies.”

“There are more of you?” asked Knock Out.

“Many more,” replied Tango. “But that’s beside the point.”

“Right. What’s your name?”

“It’s Tango.”


“Thank you. The Madam gave it to me.”
“So are there any other speedsters in your group?”

“One other. He was there that night.” Tango looked up at Breakdown. “The dark red mech.”

“Yes. I remember,” Breakdown said. “What about the black mech? The one who still looks somewhat like a vehicon?”

“The commander? No. They could care less about speed.”

“Tango, I have another question.”

Breakdown had Tango’s undivided attention. “Yes?”

“I spoke to an eradicon on the Nemesis. He was stationed on Earth before we arrived. He said to stay away from you Neutrals because you were dangerous.”

“And he is absolutely right. Especially if you get on our bad side. Anyway, it was nice to see you both again, but I have to be going now.” He turned and fell into his alt mode.

Knock Out looked up at Breakdown for a moment.

Breakdown noticed and smiled down at him. “What?”

Instead of answering, the red mech turned and ran after the orange car. “Tango, wait a minute.”

Tango stopped and let him catch up. Knock Out knelt next to him.

“I want to say thank you,” he said in a low voice, his optics shifted to the side, “for saving Breakdown. He means a lot to me.”

Tango was too surprised to respond right away. “You’re welcome,” he replied softly.

Knock Out smiled and stood up.

“Also that extra paint still looks good on you,” Tango added playfully.

Knock Out looked down at himself and growled. “Oh, get out of here, you bucket of bolts.” He aimed a kick at Tango’s rear end.

Laughing, Tango pulled away just in time.

“What was that all about?” asked Breakdown, coming up behind him.

“Oh, nothing.” Knock Out smiled up at him. “Let’s get back to the Nemesis.”
It was nighttime. The children had already been taken home. Liliy was sitting in the chair just staring off into space.

“A token for your thoughts,” Optimus’s deep voice rumbled, breaking the silence.

Startled, Liliy looked over at the tall mech manning the monitors. He looked back at her with concern in his optics.

“I was just…” She paused, her gaze dropping to the floor. “…thinking about my family.”

“You miss them.” It was a statement not a question.

“Yes…”

“Do you wish to see them?”

Her gaze snapped back up to his.

“Can I?” she asked.

He regarded her for a moment. She looked up at him with hopeful eyes and she was almost tempted to see if she could pout to get her way. It didn’t usually work when Miko pouted but then again, Miko often got into trouble too.

“Alright,” he said finally.

Liliy grinned. She quickly got up from the chair and hurried around to the computers. Putting in some coordinates, she activated the ground bridge. Then she leapt off the platform and rolled when she hit the floor. She came up running, but before she disappeared into the portal, she called over her shoulder to the mech who just stood watching her in surprise.

“Thank you so much, Optimus. See you in a week.”

Liliy came out of the portal not far from the Canadian city of Toronto. She looked over the city lights before snapping her visor over her eyes and calling up her own bridge to her base.

A super happy smile adorned the faceplate of Victor, a sky blue and white grounder, who was running the bridge controls when she returned.

“Hey, Victor.” In a flash, she was on his shoulder and giving his helm a one-armed hug. “Guess what,” she said, laughing at his surprised look.

“What?” he asked.

“I get to stay for a whole week this time.”

Liliy always loved the way her boys’ optics lit up when something excited them.

“Yes!” he exclaimed, throwing his servos in the air and almost knocking Liliy off his shoulder.

“Party time!”
“What are you doing, Victor?” came a voice from the main hall. A lime green femme appeared in the doorway. “If Alfa hears about you goofing off…”

“I think he’ll make an exception this time, Lima,” said Liliy.

“Madam!” Turning, the little femme called to the others in the hall, “Hey, guys, the Madam is back!”

More voices drifted to them along with the thudding of metal feet. Suddenly there were six more bots in the room, all their optics lighting up as happy smiles split their faceplates. Liliy laughed. This was her favorite place to be.

Liliy did not let them start the party until morning so that those in recharge could get their rest. As usual, the party lasted the entire day and well into the night. After things finally started to wind down, Liliy asked Leecher to accompany her to the medbay.

In the medbay, the mech sat on a metal stool and leaned forward, resting their arms on the counter. Then their mask split in half just below the darkened visor. Behind the open mask there were no faceplates. In fact, there was nothing there that even resembled the interior of a mech’s helm. Instead, there was mostly empty space with a throne-like seat at the back, just the right size for Liliy. To the left of it, about shoulder-height, sat a curious creature. It appeared to be made of fine chain mail. Two yellow optics stood on flexible stems like snail eyes. The body could also be likened to a snail’s save for the caterpillar-like legs on the underside near the front. It had two tails shaped like leeches’ mouths that were in fact the creature’s mouths used to suck energon. They also worked well as hands for gripping. Fully stretched out, not including the optic stems, it was just longer than Liliy’s arm in her robot mode. This creature, most likely an experiment gone wrong, was sentient. And very intelligent. Because of its nearly unquenchable desire to suck energon from just about anything, it called itself a cyberleech or just ‘Leech’.

“What is it, Lil’?” the cyberleech asked, its voice coming from a small speaker at the base of the optic stems. It had crawled out of the Leecher mech armor and was sitting on Liliy’s personal console looking up at the femme. She stood next to her chair and stared at the floor.

“Please don’t be angry,” she replied as she dropped her holoform cover.

The inner working of its optics dilated in disbelief at the slumped, crumpled form that was her left shoulder.

“What…? No! WHEN?”

“Oh, since I ran into the Autobots on the highway.”

“What!?!??!?!” Leech shrieked.

“You’re angry.”

“Of course I am! How many times have I told you not to let your injuries go?” One tail thumped hard on the console. “How many?!”

“But I don’t feel anything on that side.”

“It doesn’t matter!”
“I’m sorry. But I am here now. Leech, will you please fix my shoulder?”

Heaving a frustrated sigh, the cyberleech relented and beckoned for her to come closer with a tail. She sat in the chair so that she was closer to its level.

“You know, Lil’,” Leech said, examining the injury closely. “If you die, I will too. We are practically bonded after all.”

“Yeah. I know.” Muttering, she added, “And all the boys would lose their light.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

Alfa sat across from Echo, one leg stretched out. He absently rubbed his ped against Echo’s as he read his data pad. Echo sighed and pulled away his ped away causing Alfa to look up. Echo was covering his face with his servo.

“What’s wrong?”

Echo just peeked at him between his digits as the rec room door swished open and the gulfstream twins entered.

‘Oh,’ mouthed Alfa.

“Echooo,” the twins chorused together when they spotted him. They came and sat on either side of the slightly smaller flyer and leaned on his shoulders.

“Echo, we’re really tired. Will you get us some energon?” asked Indy.

“Yeah. Will you get us some energon?” agreed Golf.

Alfa set aside his data pad and got up.

“If you wanted some energon,” said Echo, not paying attention to where Alfa went, “you should have got it while you were up.”

“But the dispenser is on the other of the room,” whined Golf.

“Please, Echo,” Indy begged.

“You two really need to-” Echo started.

Alfa came back then and handed a fresh cube of energon to each of the twins. They stopped leaning on Echo and reached for the cubes.

“Awesome. Thanks, Alfa.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Alfa.”

“Alfa, why did you do that?” Echo asked, exasperated, as the tall flyer returned to his seat and picked up his data pad.

[You know, if we were a human family, they would be your adopted children and I would be their]
doting step-father.] Alfa sent Echo in amusement but there was not a hit of it on his face.

Echo didn't deny the idea. [Please. Only when they're off duty.]

[Of course. Someone has to keep the brats in line.]

[They are the same age as we are.]

[They certainly don't act like it.]

[Neither does Foxtrot.]

[True.]

The twins seemed to liven up a bit with fresh energon in them.

“What’s so important that you can’t say it out loud?” asked Golf, sensing their conversation.

“They’re probably talking bad about us, Golf,” said Indy.

“Probably,” Golf agreed.

“We were comparing you to human children,” replied Echo.

“What?” Golf shrieked.

“We’re not children,” cried Indy.

“Alfa said it. Not me,” Echo answered.

The twins looked at Alfa but he seemed to be suddenly very interested in his data pad and ignored them.

It took Leech nearly three days to replace Liliy’s plating and get everything realigned so that she could transform again. The Laserblade let out a sigh of relief after transforming. She twisted and stretched on the medbay counter.

“Aw, yes. Finally. Less cramped.”

Foxtrot raised an optic ridge at her. “Less cramped?”

“Yeah. My alt-mode may still be bi-ped but it cuts 7 inches off my height and makes me skinnier. You know that, Fox.”

“Woah. Seven inches? That sure is a-!!”

The medic’s pedes were swept out from under him, cutting him off, and he crashed to the floor on his back, momentarily offlineing his optics. When they came back online, he found Liliy standing on his chestplates, looking down at him with a triumphant smirk and her hand on her hip.

“Either way, I’m tall enough to put you on your aft, Foxtrot.”

“A fact I am always grateful for, Madam,” he replied, referring to a time when she had knocked him down in a similar manner, saving his spark from an Insecticon.
Her smirk became a smile. “Well then. Why don’t we try to get a canister or two of red energon filled while I’m here? What do you say?”

She jumped off him and disappeared back up to the counter.

“Sure thing, ma’am,” the mech said as he clambered to his pedes and went to get the supplies she would need.

Liliy climbed inside the helm of the Leecher armor and sat back in the seat.

“Are you ready for this, Lil’?” asked Leech, perched on the back of the seat while its tails plugged into the two ports beside it. “It has been a while since you have piloted this thing with me.”

“When have I ever not been ready?” replied Liliy as the plates on her left shoulder slide back to expose her parts.

“Just thought I’d ask.” Leech slipped off the seat and latched onto Liliy’s shoulder strut.

Liliy blinked when some wires connected between her and Leech and they synchronized.

“It has been awhile since I’ve had you in my head, I guess,” Liliy admitted at the amount of information passing between them.

“I’ll say. This is what you do all day? Babysit humans and lounge around the Autobot base?”

“They don’t like to let me out much.”

“Apparently.”

The mask closed them in and the heads-up display activated, lighting the visor orange. Liliy reached out with her processor thru Leech and felt the armor around her. Today it gave her the feeling of power. The knowledge that, in this armor, she could fight on equal footing with bots that would normally just be able to step on her. Sometimes, however, the armor would remind her of just how small she really was.

“Let’s go train.”

“Does anyone want to grapple?” Leecher asked the bots gathered in the large training room.

“I will,” called one of the twins, coming forward.

“Very well, G-” Leecher paused. Then their mask split open and Liliy frowned at him.

“Indy, why are you wearing Golf’s colors?” she asked.

“He, he. To see how long it would take for someone to notice,” Indy said. “It seems the only ones we can’t ever trick are you and Echo, Madam.”

Golf came over and high-fived his twin. Their colors switched back to normal. They both were mostly cream colored but Golf had royal purple accents and Indy’s were royal blue.

“Is this better, Madam?” They turned to look for her approval only to be tackled by Leecher.
“It doesn’t matter. We can kick both your afts either way,” Leecher said, pulling away from them.

“Oh yeah?”

“You’re on.”

Their masks fell over their faceplates as they rushed forward to tackle Leecher.

“Ow, ow, ow. That’s hurts!” cried Indy, pulling his arm away from the welding torch.

“Well, if you quit squirming…” said Oscar. The red and yellow copterbot caught the arm again and held firm so he could finish welding the crack in Indy’s armor shut.

The medbay doors opened to allow Echo to enter. He stopped just inside the room and crossed his arms over his chassis.

“I hear you two decided to go all out on the commander,” he said as he took in the sight of the twins being treated by the medics.

“A lot of good it did us. They still won,” grumbled Golf.

“Yes. They may have won but you did some damage.”

“Like what? Scratched their paint?” asked Indy.

“Like we have get our spare armor,” Leech said, hanging from Liliy’s shoulder as the Laserblade crossed the medbay via the countertops. They went to a large cabinet in the back of the room. Liliy activated a control panel on the side of the cabinet and the doors slide open. Inside stood another Leecher armor.

“I think you guys forget that Leecher is just armor and doesn’t register pain so they can fight beyond the limits of a normal mech,” Oscar informed them.

“Yeah, yeah. We know.”

“Golf. Indy.” The twins looked over at Liliy. Leech had already detached from her shoulder and disappeared into the armor. “I would like to apologize.”

“What? Why?”

“Madam, what for?”

“For sending you to the medbay. I’m not usually that aggressive, am I? And to you, Echo, in case this causes you any trouble with the twins.”

“What? Madam, you are not to blame.”

“Yeah. We kind of encouraged you. A little.”

“They’re always trouble,” Echo stated.

“We are not, Echo!” the twins complained.

Liliy burst out laughing. “Oh man, I missed you guys. I really need to come home more often.”
“Yes! You do!” All six mechs agreed in unison.

“Definitely,” added Leecher, having powered up and stepped out of the cabinet.

“We miss you a lot too, Madam,” said Foxtrot.

“Well, I’ll have to try and do that then.”

“Can we have another party before you leave?” asked Indy.

“We’ll see. First, you two need to finish getting fixed.”

“We’re practically fixed already,” proclaimed Golf.

Foxtrot gently poked the abnormal crook in Golf’s wing that still needed to be straightened. Golf yelped and jerked away from him.

“Foxtrot,” Echo warned, glaring at him.

“What? I was just proving a point.”

“Alright, alright. Echo, time to let the medics do their work,” Liliy said as she headed for the door.

Echo shot another glare at the smirking Foxtrot then obediently turned and followed Liliy out the door with Leecher behind him. Out in the hall, Liliy zipped up to Echo’s shoulder.

“Are you mad at me?” she asked.

Echo waited for Leecher to move ahead of them before he answered.

“No. I’m upset, yes, but not with you. Because I know how those two can be and this is partially their fault. One of these days they’re going to push it too far and one or both of them will be gravely injured.” Echo looked down at his servos and clutched them into fists. “That is a day I hope never comes.”

Liliy leaned against the side of his helm. “Even though I don’t have the bond with them that you do, I understand. I don’t want to see that day either. They are my boys the same as you. I hate seeing you guys get badly hurt.” They entered the main hall. “Well, I have to go see Bravo about repairs for the other armor. I’ll see you later, Echo.” She disappeared from his shoulder.

Echo watched her cross the main hall and sent Alfa a thought. *If we were a human family, Liliy wouldn’t be our sister. She would be our mother.*

After a moment, Alfa replied. *Our mother is tiny.*

Echo smirked as he returned to the Comm center. *Yes, but we can rely on her.*

*Indeed.* There was a long pause while Alfa was thoughtful. *But she is like our sister too.*

*Hm. You’re right. Sister-Mom it is then.*
“On my way, Lima,” Liliy answered, setting aside the datapad she was working on. She hurried over to the Comm center and found Lima, Pepper, and Delta gathered around one of the monitors. The Laserblade climbed up to the console in front of them. “What’s the problem?”

“One of the Autobot signals momentarily disappeared while it was in their base,” explained Lima. “When it came back, I was getting strange reading from it. I called Pepper to make sure there was nothing wrong with our computer—”

“It’s working perfectly,” commented the neon yellow mech.

“And then I called Delta to see if he knew what it was.”

“I can’t really make heads or tails of it,” said Delta.

“Whose signal is it?” Liliy asked, looking at the monitor.

“Ratchet’s,” answered Lima.

Liliy’s optics widened. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. Everyone else is accounted for.” Lima zoomed out on the map to show that the rest of the Autobots were currently in another location.

“That idiot!” Liliy exclaimed with an angry wave of her servo.

“What is it, ma’am?” asked Pepper.

Liliy turned to them as she explained. “Ratchet has been working on the formula for synthetic energon because their stockpile is getting low. From what I have seen from his research, the formula he has is far from complete. If he got desperate and tested it on himself...” She looked at the monitor again.

“It would explain his signal distorting,” Delta mused.

“Ma’am,” interrupted Lima. “The other Autobots are chasing some Cons. It looks like there is going to be trouble.”

“Who is out on surveillance?” Liliy wanted to know.

“Hirry, Yankee, and Zulu.”

“Send them in. Their orders are not to engage unless absolutely necessary.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Lima relayed the orders to the surveillance team.

The team had to be ground bridged to a spot near the Autobots’ location. The Autobots were chasing Knock Out and Breakdown along the bottom of a canyon. Luckily, the surveillance team arrived just after a squad of eradicons entered the canyon, so they weren’t spotted. Hirry and Zulu
drove along the top of the canyon while Yankee flew overhead and sent a video feed back to base.

The eradicons fired missiles at the canyon walls to cause a rockslide to stop the Autobots, but Arcee managed to get through. She was separated from the others but continued to pursue the Con grounders despite the threat from the eradicons. The eradicons managed to stop her with a missile blast and she appeared to be hurt. The eradicons transformed and dropped to the ground to surround her. Both Hirry and Zulu were at the edge of the canyon, ready to snipe the eradicons before they could kill Arcee. However, a ground bridge opened in the air just below them and Ratchet arrived.

“That idiot! Did he suddenly get scrap for brains?” Liliy growled as she watched Ratchet plow thru the eradicons around Arcee. “He really did test the stuff on himself.”

“It seems to be working quite well,” observed Delta.

“Is it really? Synthetic energon is supposed to be a substitute for natural energon, but this looks like an enhancement; like a drug. And what are the after effects going to be? His formula was incomplete. We already know the stuff has altered his spark signal. What is it doing to the rest of him?”

“If you’re worried about him, are you going to go back?” asked Pepper.

“No way!” she snapped. “I told Prime I was going to be gone for a week so I am going to be gone for a week. We can monitor Ratchet’s condition from here and send someone to intervene if necessary. I am not going to let that idiot ruin my vacation.”

“That’s the third time you have called him an idiot,” Delta pointed out.

“Yeah, so?” Liliy took a moment to collect her thoughts and sighed. “Lima, keep an optic on him. If he leaves the base again, send someone to watch him. Delta, you and I are going to go have a look at that old data cylinder to see if we get the rest of that formula.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And Pepper…” The mech waited patiently for his orders while Liliy looked again at the carnage left in the Autobot medic’s wake on the monitor. Her tone was quiet when she finally spoke again. “Find Fox and Oscar and go help the surveillance team with clean-up. Call for more help if you need too.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Ratchet is on the move again,” Lima said, watching the Autobots signals move across the monitor. “The Madam said to send someone to watch him.”

“Who is still out?” asked Echo, joining her.

“Yankee is closest and can arrive without a bridge.”

“Then send him.”

Ratchet crouched over the prone miner, holding his welding torch to the mech’s mask. The Con
was screaming.

“Where is Megatron?” Ratchet demanded, momentarily pulling the torch away.

Before the miner could answer, something big, peach and green slammed into the medic, knocking him away from the Con. The miner shakily pushed himself into sitting position. Between him and the Autobot, who was slowly getting up, stood a helicopter mech painted peach and pistachio green. The new mech turned to him, the orange visor in his vehicon-like mask flashing.

“Get out of here!” he ordered.

The miner wasted no time scrambling to his pedes and running away.

“Oh, no, you don’t.” Ratchet transformed and took after him.

The copterbot, who was slightly larger than Ratchet, latched onto the back of his alt-mode and lifted the ambulance off the ground. He spun once and released. Ratchet transformed and hit the ground chest first. He slide to the edge of the plateau, sending a shower of rocks and dust down the slope, alerting the other Autobots to his position.

With a growl, Ratchet got to his feet and faced the strange mech. He brought out his knives and rushed the copterbot. The mech dodged his strikes with ease, occasionally blocking them with his tail-rotor-blades-turned-knives. After blocking a strike meant to take his spark, the stranger shoved hard, sending the medic stumbling back and putting some distance between them.

“What are you doing?” the mech demanded. “You’re a medic! You are supposed to help people, not hurt them!”

“It was just a Decepticon,” Ratchet spat.

“Just a…?” The mech was incredulous. “That was an unarmed miner! Decepticon or not, you had no right to melt his mask to his faceplates!”

The other Autobots, who had appeared while they were fighting, looked startled.

“Ratchet,” asked Prime, “what did you do?”

“I was just trying to find out where Megatron is.”

“By torturing the poor mech!” the copterbot declared.

“Ratchet, what were you thinking?” Optimus wanted to know.

“That I was going to get results.”

“By breaking protocol? Ratchet, you know that Autobots do not inflict harm unless all other options have been exhausted.” Prime’s optics narrowed. “It is what separates us from the Decepticons.”

Ratchet gave short laugh. “Is this really the time for another lecture, Optimus? If it wasn’t for this…” He gestured at the stranger who stood listening with his arms crossed over his chassis. “... interference, I would know where Megatron and his stockpile of energon is right now!”

“My name is Yankee,” the mech supplied. “I’m a member of the CRC Surveillance Team.”

Ratchet glowered at him. “Like I care who you are!”
Bulkhead put a servo on the medic’s shoulder. “Come on, Ratchet. Calm it down.”

“Calm is the last thing we need!” Ratchet snapped, swatting Bulkhead’s servo away. “Calm is what lost us Cybertron!” He paced about, gesturing as he spoke. “The Cons have a warship! An army! All this energon scouting! You think Megatron isn’t gearing up for something big! We’re squandering our resources chasing after his crumbs when we really need to be hitting him hard and hitting him now! Precisely where it hurt!”

“A direct assault on the Decepticons would only provoke retaliation,” Optimus countered. “And lead to incalculable losses. I will not endanger innocent human lives.”

“Yet you have seem to have no problem endangering ours!” retorted Ratchet. “Just ask Cliffjumper! Oh, I forgot! He couldn’t be here today!”

“That’s it!” exclaimed Arcee as she advanced on Ratchet but Bulkhead grabbed her arms and held her back.

“You know your problem, Optimus?” the medic continued, ignoring Arcee’s murderous glare. “For such a big, strong bot, you’re soft. You didn’t pound Megatron into scrap when you had the chance! Many chances in fact!”

“I’m afraid the synthetic energon has impaired your judgement, old friend,” replied Optimus slowly. “I am confining you to base until further notice.”

Ratchet crossed his arms. “Hmh. It doesn’t matter. I never did find out where Megatron is.”

“Why do you want to know so badly, medic?” asked Yankee. “Do you think you can take on the warlord?”

“Oh, I know I can.” Ratchet smashed his fist into his palm.

Yankee chuckled dryly. “You couldn’t even land a hit on me. I’d wager that you might get one hit in on Megatron because your new ‘strength’ would catch him by surprise but after that… a seasoned gladiator like him? You wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“What do you care?” snapped Ratchet. “It’s not like you know where he is either!”

“Actually, I do.”

They stared at him in surprise.

“What? It’s the CRC’s job to know where all the other Cybertronians are. Who do you think cleans up all the messes after you and the Cons get into a fight?”


Yankee’s visor flickered slightly and he tilted his helm as if he was listening to something. “The commander says maybe we should let you go after Megatron. A good pounding might knock some sense back into that impaired processor of yours.”

“Absolutely not!” snapped Optimus.

“As you wish,” Yankee replied with a casual shrug. Stepping back, he transformed and took to the air, throwing up dust around the Autobots.
Ratchet turned a glare on Optimus as the Prime requested a ground bridge from Bumblebee. A vortex opened near them. Ratchet sighed.

“Fine,” he muttered, stalking toward it.

He had just entered the ground bridge when he received a data package on his private comm. He opened it and found it was the coordinates for Megatron’s location. Ratchet abruptly turned and ran out of the bridge. He plowed into Bulkhead who had just started to follow. He shoved the green mech at Optimus, who caught him. Transforming, the medic dropped to his tires and sped away before the others could recover enough to follow him.

Yankee dropped out of sight of the Autobots and circled back around on foot to help the clean-up crew. They had bridged in and started working as soon as the Bots had climbed up to the plateau. Using red energon, they worked fast to save any survivors. Now they were collecting the corpses and abandoned mining equipment.

“How many survivors?” he asked no one in particular.


“So few again?”

“The synthetic energon has made Ratchet quite ruthless.”

“That’s why you had me send him after Megatron.”

“That idiot will learn his lesson.”

“Or get himself killed.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We didn’t send him alone.”

The Autobots returned to their base after searching for several hours for their medic. Arcee went immediately to the main console to try and locate Ratchet’s signal.

“No good,” she said after a moment. “I can’t get a fix on Ratchet’s coordinates.”

“That bogus energon must be scrambling his signal,” Bulkhead commented.

In a very rare show of fury, Optimus slammed his fist down on the comm. “Optimus Prime to Yankee! Come in!”

There was a short burst of static. Then...

{Apologies, sir. I was simply following my commander’s orders,} a confident voice answered, but Optimus thought he detected a slight hint of sheepishness.

“Where did you send Ratchet?” he asked.

{Can’t tell you. That would ruin the lesson if you show up too soon.}

“What lesson? What are you talking about?”
As a medic, he should know better than to test an unstable experiment on himself. He is going to learn that lesson again. The hard way. But rest assured, we are not sending him alone. You will get him back alive.

Optimus got the distinct impression that he was no longer talking to Yankee but to someone else who sounded like him or was using his voice to hide their own.

“Please. He is my friend. I want to help him,” he pleaded. "Where is he?"

His only answer was static.

Liliy lifted her servo from the commlink, severing the connection and leaving Optimus unanswered and very likely worried.

“Are Romeo and Foxtrot in position?” she asked.

“Yes,” confirmed Echo. “Ratchet has entered the mine and is about to encounter Breakdown.”

“Understood.” Liliy activated the comm again and spoke into it. “You two know what you’re supposed to do?”

{Have a little faith, Madam.} Romeo replied.

{Keep the medic alive at all costs. Even if I have to leave Romeo here,} said Foxtrot.

{Hey now. Maybe I should leave you behind. I am faster after all.}

“Boys! Enough! I would very much prefer it if both of you came back. Understood?”

{Yes, ma’am!} they both answered.

“Ratchet is approaching Megatron and Knock Out,” said Echo.

{We have visual.}

{Ooh. Yank’ was right. The medic only got in one hit.}

Foxtrot and Romeo flinched when they heard the sickening crunch that Ratchet’s armor made when Megatron’s fist connected with it, hard. They remained where they were, hidden down the passageway, their blasters trained on the warlord as the larger mech tossed the medic aside like a ragdoll. Then Megatron stalked off in the opposite direction, leaving the Autobot to the mercy of Knock Out.

The Con medic knelt beside Ratchet and retrieved a small canister from his subspace.

“Doctor to doctor,” Knock Out said, carefully filling the canister with the glowing green energon that poured from Ratchet’s wound, “I must say, your contribution to the Decepticon cause is very much appreciated.”

Ratchet, only able to pull in shaky vents, suddenly looked startled by something behind the red medic.
“Doctor to doctor, Knock Out,” mocked a voice, accompanied by the whine of charging blasters, “your bedside manners are lacking.”

Knock Out twisted and came face-to-face with three charged blasters. He looked up and found they belong to two strange mechs with vehicon-type masks.

“You guys again?” he asked, focusing on the masks.

The boxier of the two, painted red and white, held out his unchanged servo. “The canister, if you please.”

Knock Out laughed. “I don’t think so.”

The other mech, more shapely than his partner with lots of curves and dark red paint, touched the hot muzzle of his blaster to the Con’s shoulder plating. Knock Out yelped and jerked away.

“My finish!” he exclaimed, examining the scorch mark that was left behind.

“We’ll do more than ruin your precious finish if you don’t do as you’re told.” The blaster moved closer to his face.

“Alright, alright!” Knock Out raised his servos over his helm.

The red and white mech grabbed the canister from his servo. The next instant, it was shattered against the tunnel wall.

“Now, get up and move away from the Autobot,” Foxtrot demanded.

Knock Out obeyed. The red and white mech took his place beside Ratchet.

“How is he, Fox?” asked Romeo.

Foxtrot scanned Ratchet. “He’s lost a lot of energon but he’ll live. The wound is mostly superficial but there is some minor damage to his internal systems.”

Knock Out snorted. “I could have told you that.”

“Oh, shut up, will you?” Romeo leveled a blaster at the Con’s spark chamber and fired.

Horror twisted Knock Out’s faceplates as he fell back and lay on the floor, convulsing slightly as electricity surged thru his systems.

“Is he dead?” Ratchet managed to gasp out, watching as the red Con finally stilled.

“Unfortunately, no. We are forbidden from extinguishing another’s spark unless it is absolutely necessary,” replied Foxtrot. Mumbling, he added, “That and Tango would be mad at us.”

“Fox, the Autobots are in the mine.”

“I know, Romeo. With the loss of the synthetic energon, they were finally able to track his signal.”

“Optimus...?” Ratchet managed.

“Yes. He is coming,” Fox assured him. “It is alright if you power down. We will make sure you are taken care of.”
A tired sigh escaped from the medic as he fell into stasis. A moment later, three Autobots came around the corner and spotted them.

“Ratchet!” cried Bulkhead, aiming his blasters at them.

“Wait, Bulkhead,” said Arcee, putting out her servo to stop the wrecker. Recognizing the dark red mech, she stepped forward and addressed him. “You’re Romeo, aren’t you? CRC surveillance?”

Romeo pushed up his mask and smirked. “Correct. Nice to know that you remember me. This is Foxtrot,” he gestured to the mech next to Ratchet. “He’s one of our medics.”

“As I told Romeo a few moments ago,” Foxtrot explained, “your friend here has lost a lot of energon. The wound Megatron inflicted on him is mostly superficial but there is some minor damage to his internal systems. He needs a transfusion as soon as possible. May I accompany you back to your base so that I can look after him?”

“Whoa, Fox, you sure the Madam will be ok with that?” asked Romeo.

“The Madam is the one who taught me not to abandon a patient.” Foxtrot looked up at Optimus. “I am offering my services as a medic.”

“Very well. I will leave him in your servos.”

Ratchet slowly came back online. He found himself lying on a medical berth in his own medbay, hooked up to an energon transfusion machine. As he started to sit up a servo caught his shoulder and gently pushed him back down.

“Whoa there, hotshot,” a voice said. “You’ve lost a lot of energon. You just need to rest for now.”

Ratchet looked up at the strange mech and noticed the red cross on his upper arm.

“Are you a medic?” He managed to ask.

“Yes. I don’t know if you remember but we met in the mine earlier. You were lying on the ground in a pool of your own energon. My name is Foxtrot, by the way. I’m one of the CRC’s medics.”

“Where is Optimus?”

“He should-” Foxtrot was interrupted by the ground bridge opening. “There he is now.” He called to the big mech who was setting down the energon cubes he was carrying. “Optimus, he’s awake and asking for you.”

Optimus’ faceplates were the picture of relief as he approached the med berth.

“Good to see you awake, old friend.”

“Optimus. I-I’m sorry I made you worry. I didn’t intend to hurt anyone, I just wanted so badly to-”

“-Help us. We know.”

“Didn’t intend to hurt anyone?” Foxtrot repeated, crossing his arms over his chassis. “Does that include the miner whose faceplates we had to replace?”

“I...” Ratchet looked away from him with a frown.
“Thought so,” Foxtrot muttered. He looked up at Optimus. “Now that he’s awake, he should be fine. Just make sure he rests for a couple more days and cycle the transfusions a few more times to make sure all the synthetic energon is out of his systems.”

“Understood. Thank you, Foxtrot,” replied Optimus.

The medic nodded and started to walk toward the exit tunnel. He stopped and turned when he remembered something.

“By the way, next time you’re running low on energon, instead of going on a wild goose chase and nearly getting yourself killed, please call us. We have plenty to spare, especially since we have the completed formula.” He winked with that last part and then transformed into his alt-mode. Tires squealing on the concrete floor, the jeep took off, disappearing thru a ground bridge in the tunnel before he reached the exit.

“So, what did I miss?” Liliy asked after she returned to base when her week was up.


“Synth’N?”

“Yeah. You know, the synthetic energon he was working on. He tested it on himself.”

“Did he finish the formula?”

“No. But he wanted to test it. It made him faster and stronger-”

“And studlier,” added Bulkhead, interrupting.

“But there were bad side effects too,” continued Raf. “He became irritable-”

“How is that different?” asked Bulkhead.

“More than usual. He went off on Optimus, remember?” said Arcee.

“And irrational. He tried to take on Megatron all by himself. It didn’t end well,” Raf finished.

“Ha, wow. I’m glad I wasn’t here for that,” said Liliy.

“Yeah. It was pretty bad. How was your week, Liliy?” Raf wanted to know. “Is your family doing well?”

Liliy grinned. “It was fantastic. Everyone is doing well. We partied for a whole day after I arrived. But then I spent a few days in our clinic because I hurt my shoulder. Lee wasn’t too happy with me but he got over it. Overall though, it was a good week.”

Later, when Liliy was walking past Ratchet, she said “Idiot!” just loud enough for him to hear but when he turned around, she was gone.
“And it was written the covenant of Primus, that when the 47 spheres align, a perpetual conflict will culminate upon a world forged from chaos,” Optimus read off the monitor before him. “And the weak shall perish in the shadow of a rising darkness.”

“No ‘sky’s raining fire’?” Arcee asked.

“Goes without saying,” Ratchet answered. “It is a doom prophecy after all.”

“I say it’s a loada hoo-wee,” said Bulkhead.

“I’d always assumed the ancients were referring to our home planet,” Ratchet explained. “But being that Cybertron has been dark for eons...”

“And considering what has befallen this planet since Megatron's arrival here,” Optimus added.

“Whoa whoa whoa,” interrupted Bulkhead. “We’ve known about these superstitions for ages and never gave ’em a second thought.”

“Why all the ominous rumblings now?” Arcee wanted to know.

“Because the planetary alignment to which the prophecy refers is nearly upon us,” stated Optimus.

“And it would seem its end point is Earth.” Ratchet gestured up at the monitor that showed a diagram of the alignment.

“Uh… crazy coincidence.” Bulkhead did finger guns. “Right?”

“How long are we talking?” Arcee stepped forward.

Ratchet turned to her. “A few days, at most.”

“However unsettling this revelation maybe,” commented Optimus. “I am more concerned about those who might believe that the prophecy speaks to them alone.”

“You’re talking about Megatron, aren’t you?” asked Liliy who was sitting by the computers.

He glanced at her through the monitor since he stood behind them while Ratchet stood in front. “Indeed.”

Later, the children were scrolling thru a conspiracy website on Raf’s computer.

“Pass… Nuh uh… Kid in a costume… Balloon…” Jack said as each picture went by. “Nope… Oh, hold.”

Raf stopped scrolling on a picture of Bumblebee in his alt-mode without a driver.

“Camera sure loves Bee,” Jack said.

“What can you do?” said Miko, sitting back on the couch. “When you’re a superstar, you’re paparazzi bait.”
“Wait. Is that Bumblebee?” asked Ratchet. He was in the medbay and could see the computer screen from there.

“On a conspiracy website, where users post pictures of close encounters,” explained Raf. “But we have it under control, Ratchet. We just scrub and replace Bee with-”

“Mars cat says, ‘take me to you feeder’,” said the little video that Raf used to replace the picture of Bumblebee.

Ratchet let out an amused laugh and then looked surprised with himself for laughing. The children stared at him.

“Ratchet actually laughed?” asked Miko in surprise.

Ratchet seemed unsure.

“Heh. Um, Optimus, you wanna see something funny?” inquired Jack.

“No.” came the immediate reply.

“Don’t take it personally,” said Arcee. “Primes are built that way.”

“Never seen Optimus laugh, cry, or lose his cool,” added Bulkhead.

“I have,” whispered Liliy while sitting in her chair and playing with her phone. She wasn’t really talking to them, but Ratchet heard her anyway.

“Have what?” he asked.

Liliy looked up, confused. “What?”

Ratchet stared at Liliy for a moment, before addressing the children again. “While Optimus certainly keeps his emotions in check. I’ve known him far longer than any of you have. And he was different before he was made a Prime.”

“Optimus wasn’t always a Prime?” asked Raf.

“On Cybertron, one isn’t born into greatness, rather one must earn it.”

“So, different how? We talking party animal?” Miko was curious.

“No. No. Optimus was more like... Jack.”

“What? I’m nothing like Op-”

{Prime!} Jack was interrupted by Fowler on the commlink. {Those tech heists my department’s been tracking, we figured it was MECH on account of their stealth tactics. Until moments ago when a security feed at the Pennington Ebbs particle collider captured this.}

A picture of Soundwave showed up on the monitor. Thankfully, Liliy wasn’t looking.

“Soundwave.” She heard Jack say as he and the others moved over to the monitors. She stiffened in her chair and didn’t dare to turn and look.

“Raf can swap that out for you with a funny cat,” Miko said.
“Plasma injector,” Ratchet read from the list that appeared on the monitor after Fowler dropped the call. “Neutron shield. Tesseract? There’s only one thing missing if they are intending to build another space bridge.”

“Another?” asked Liliy, finally getting to view the monitors now that Soundwave’s picture was gone. “So they’ll have two?”

“No, no. We blew up the last one,” replied Ratchet.

“Yeah. Megatron was supposed to have died in that explosion,” added Bulkhead.

“It was probably the dark energon that kept him alive,” said Ratchet.

“So we have to stop the Cons from completing this one?” said Liliy.

“If we can stop the space bridge, we can stop Megatron,” replied Optimus.

“What was his name?”

“Excuse me?” asked Ratchet, looking up from his work.

“Optimus. What was his name before he became a Prime?” Liliy repeated.

“Oh. It was Orion Pax.”

“Interesting.”

“What is?”

“His old name. Orion in Greek mythology was a great hunter. In fact, one of Earth’s constellations is named after him. And Pax is the Latin word for peace. So he used to be called Hunter of Peace if you look at his name from a human perspective.”

“Hunter of Peace, huh?” Ratchet looked over at Optimus. “It fit him well.”

The comm beeped then and Agent Fowler came up on the screen when Optimus answered.

“Agent Fowler, I fear that Megatron’s desperation may be at its zenith,” replied Optimus. “And you know that I cannot condone even a single human casualty.”

Fowler sighed. {Very well, Optimus.} And he cut the call to order a retreat.

“Arcee, Bulkhead, with me. Ratchet, contact Bumblebee and have him rendezvous with us.”

“Of course, Optimus.” Ratchet activated the ground bridge. After the others left, he went to the comm to contact Bumblebee. “Bumblebee, the team may require backup. They’re three kliks north of your current position just off the highway. If you drop Raf at the exit ramp, I can bridge him back to base from there.”
Ratchet waited patiently for Bumblebee to call him but when the comm beeped, it was Optimus.

"Ratchet, bridge us back now!" he requested urgently.

“They must have an Autobot down,” Ratchet suspected as he reactivated the ground bridge.

No one would have guessed that it would actually be Raf until Arcee returned carrying him in her arms with a distraught Bumblebee beside her. The bridge closed without Optimus or Bulkhead appearing.

“What happened?” demanded Ratchet upon seeing Raf, pale and limp.

“Megatron,” Arcee replied.

“Quickly! Bring him to the medbay.”

Liliy hurried down to main floor as they took Raf over to the medbay. After Arcee put Raf on a human-sized medical bed, Ratchet started freaking out because he wasn't sure what to do. He had no idea how treat a human, even though, he had on multiple occasions expressed concern when the humans spoke of an injury.

"RATCHET!!" shouted Liliy to get his attention.

Everyone looked at her in surprise as she moved over to the medical bed where Raf lay. None of them had ever heard her raise her voice like that.

"Calm down before you blow a gasket, doc. I'll handle this." Liliy turned to Jack. "Call your mom, Jack. We may need her help."

"His mother may be a nurse but does she know anything about the effects of energon on the human body?" asked Ratchet. It did not seem to register with him to ask if Liliy knew either. She did know, having been around humans far longer than any of the Autobots.

"Do you even know anything about the human body?" Liliy countered as Jack pulled out his phone. As she started checking over Raf, she spoke to the Autobot scout. "Bumblebee, tell me what happened."

"I was going to rendezvous with the others when Megatron came out of the sky and started shooting at us. I dodged as best I could but..."

"You were hit."

"I'm going to kill Megatron!" Bumblebee whirred, slamming his fist into the wall. Arcee grabbed him to calm him down.

"That must be it then," Liliy mumbled.

While Ratchet attention was suddenly drawn to Nurse Darby's arrival via the bridge, Liliy pulled down her visor and quickly scanned the boy. She pushed her visor back up as June approached.

"What have we got?" the nurse asked, grabbing Raf’s wrist to check his pulse.

"He's been infected with dark energon,” stated Liliy.
"What??" June was confused.

"Liliy, are you certain?" asked Ratchet.

"Think about it, Ratchet," Liliy said, looking up at the medic. "Raf took an indirect hit from a blaster. Any other bot and it would've been regular energon but it was Megatron. We all know that corrupted fragger runs on dark energon. So how can we expel the stuff from Raf, doctor? You are more familiar with it than I am."

Ratchet grew quiet for moment as he thought about it. "We need to expose him to regular energon."

"But isn't that bad too?" asked June, looking from Ratchet to Liliy.

"Technically, yes," replied Ratchet. ―But we would be relying on the dark matter currently invading Rafael to meet it head on."

Ratchet grabbed a flask and drew some energon from Bumblebee who volunteered. They quickly put Raf in the containment area and exposed him to the energon. As soon as the door was open wide enough for her to get through, Liliy was at Raf’s bedside. She didn't care this time. Dropping her visor over her eyes again, she scanned him a second time.

"Vital signs are stabilizing and all traces of the dark energon appear to be gone," she said, relieved. She pushed her visor back up as the others gathered around. “He’s going to be ok.”

Raf opened his eyes. “Bee…” He managed an exhausted smile.

Optimus commed base. {Ratchet, how is Rafael?}

"It would seem he is going to be ok thanks to Liliy's quick thinking. She realized that he had been exposed to dark energon before I did. Curse my Cybertronian pride. We accepted these humans into our lives yet I bothered to learn so little about their science... or medicine."

{Pull yourself together, old friend. We still need you.}

"Yes."

{Lock on to my coordinates and activate the ground bridge.}

Ratchet activated the ground bridge but only Bulkhead came thru with the power source from the Cons.

On the Nemesis, Squad ZZ was working away when they heard the approach of heavy pedfalls. They looked down the hall and saw Optimus Prime coming toward them.

“I have come for Megatron, and him alone. Stand down and be spared.” Optimus activated his blasters.

Four of the eradicons reacted by activating their own blasters and aiming at him.

“Wait!” cried the fifth one, Ucon. He jumped in front of his comrades with his servos up. “Wait! Don’t shoot!” He looked at Optimus, who had stopped in surprise. “Please don’t shoot!”

“ZZ-05, what are you doing?” demanded ZZ-01. “Get out of the way!”
"No! He said he’s here for Megatron and he won’t hurt us if we stand down. I think that’s exactly what we should do."

"Do you have a screw loose? He’s an Autobot," cried ZZ-03.

"Exactly. Every time vehicons face an Autobot, they get hurt. I don’t want to see anyone get hurt."

Ucon looked at Optimus again. “Besides, Megatron is not even on the Nemesis anymore. He left a little while ago. If you want, I will contact him for you.”

“Please do.”

“ZZ-05!”

“Lord Megatron,” Ucon spoke into his commlink, “Optimus Prime on the Nemesis and he is looking for you.”

{Is he?} replied Megatron. The warlord switched to the ship-wide comm. {Hear this! Any Decepticon who lays a servo on Optimus Prime will answer to me! Soundwave, lock onto my coordinates and lead my opponent to his destiny.}

“Thank you,” Optimus said, looking down at ZZ-05.

“No need to thank me. I just did it so you would not have to hurt them.”

Liliy's phone rang. She glanced at the caller id before answering.

"What is it? … Whoa, whoa. Slow down. What are you saying? … … Are you sure? … Hold on.” She ran up to the computers. "Ok, what were the coordinates?" She held her phone to her ear with her shoulder as she typed. "Got it." She momentarily moved the phone away from her head so she could yell at Ratchet. "Ratchet! I found Optimus' location! It doesn't look good!"

He hurried over to the console. "What do you mean? Where is he?"

Liliy wasn't listening. She was talking to the caller again. "No. Stay there. But if things go south, evacuate. That's an order."

"Liliy, what's going on?" Ratchet asked as she hung up the phone.

"Optimus is in trouble. Not only is he fighting Megatron but there is apparently a bunch of dark energon spewing out of a volcano near his location."

“What?”

Liliy brought the terrain scans up on the big monitors. “See?”

“But how is this possible?”

“What? What is it?” asked Arcee.

Ratchet spun around. “We need to get Optimus out of there. NOW!”

He hurried to the bridge controls and locked on the coordinates. Bulkhead and Arcee went thru first and Ratchet followed. Bumblebee had to keep the bridge open for them. They came back a few minutes later with Optimus being supported by the Wrecker and the medic.
“Easy, Optimus,” chided Ratchet. “From the looks of things you’ve been exposed to a massive amount of dark energon.”

Prime looked up and saw Raf with Nurse Darby. “I am not the only one.”

Bulkhead helped Optimus sit on a med berth. The Prime looked down at Raf and smiled.

The boy on the gurney smiled back. “Hey.”

“He’s lucky to be alive,” said June, glaring up at Prime who frowned.

“Megatron found more of the dark stuff?” asked Jack, coming down the stairs.

“A volcano full,” answered Arcee.

“The question is ‘how?’” asked Bulkhead.

“No. The question is ‘what?’” corrected Ratchet. “As in what in the world is the blood of Unicron doing here on Earth.”

“The Cons killed a unicorn?” Miko asked.

The Bots stared at her blankly.

“He said Unicron, Miko,” Liliy called from her place in front of the computers, typing faster with her single hand than most humans could with two. “Not unicorn.”

“Oh... What’s Unicron?”

“An ancient evil whose fossilized blood comprises the matter we call dark energon,” explained Ratchet. “As... legend would have it.”

“So you’re saying this Unicron is some kind of bogeyman?” asked June.

“Bogeyman?” Ratchet echoed in confusion.

“Make-believe creepy guy who hides in your closet,” supplied Liliy. “You really need to read up on your Earth culture, Ratchet.”

Ratchet rolled his optics before turning back to June. “No, Nurse Darby. Unicron is very real. Was... That is, while I do believe he once existed, I just don’t subscribe to the theory that his primordial life force is the substance which... harmed Raf.”

“I’ve heard enough. Jack, please. Help me get Raf into the car,” said June as she started wheeling the gurney across the room.

Bumblebee beeped worriedly.

“Mom, I thought he was doing better?” Jack asked.

“Raf needs to be examined by real doctors. And Raf’s family needs to know what happened. His real family.”

“Mom, Raf’s family can’t protect him. Not like they can.” He gestured to the Bots.

Optimus pushed off the med berth. “June, it deeply grieves me that I have failed,” he said as he
rose shakily to his pedes. He took a few unsteady steps forward as he continued to speak. “But I will do everything in my power to insure that no harm comes to our human friends or any human ever again.”


“Mom, dark energon is pouring out of the earth. It doesn’t do that. This could be about everyone’s survival, not just ours,” argued Jack.

“You’re coming with me. All three of you.” She looked up at the Bots. “And they will not be coming back.”

She turned around and started pushing the gurney but she ran right into Liliy who had come down to the main floor.

“Actually, June, I would advise against leaving. For your safety, as well as Raf’s.”

“What do you mean?”

Liliy dropped a device that looked similar to a hockey puck on the floor. It popped open and displayed a 3-D map of Nevada and its weather.

“Because a storm is moving in. Fast. Faster than any I have ever seen. The conditions are perfect for tornados and the charges out there are building. There is going to be a lot of lightning. And it’s not just here.” She waved her hand thru the image and it zoomed out to show the whole planet and its current weather patterns. “These strange weather patterns are happening all over the world. I suspect they are related to the volcano… And the seven massive earthquakes that all happened at the same time but each on a different tectonic plate.”

“Liliy, how do you know all-” started Ratchet.

{Prime. Do you copy?} Agent Fowler sudden came up on the comm.

“I hear you, Agent Fowler,” Optimus answered, moving to the console.

{Been watching the news? Mother Nature has got a twitch in her britches.}

“I was just telling them about it,” Liliy said, now back up by the computers.

{Don’t tell me the Cons have built a weather machine.}

“One powerful enough to affect the weather on a global scale? Highly unlikely,” said Ratchet.

“Besides a weather machine wouldn’t account for the earthquakes and the volcano,” added Liliy.

“And I do not believe the appearance of dark energon at this point in time to be coincidental,” Optimus informed him.

{Dark energon? What- Actually, no. I’m on my way to the base now. You can fill me in when I get there.}

“Be careful out there, Agent Fowler,” Liliy said. “It’s probably going to get a bit windy.”
{No kidding,} he said before dropping the call.

When Agent Fowler finally arrived, the humans were gathered around the TV, watching the news. Liliy was still over by the computers.

“What have you learned, Prime?” he asked as soon as he stepped out of the elevator. “And you better not blow smoke up my—” He caught sight of June and his tone changed quick. “Uh, Miss Darby. What a nice surprise.”

June seemed unfazed and smiled at him. “Special Agent Fowler.”

“We have learned this,” said Ratchet, drawing Fowler’s attention to the monitors. “As with the so-called magma from the volcano, these earthquakes originated far beneath the Earth’s crust. From the very center of the Earth’s core, in fact.”

“Quakes don’t start there.” He glanced at June who came over to stand beside him. “Do they?”

“Tiny tremors rising and falling in a consistent pattern,” Ratchet continued. “Almost like…”

“Like a Cybertronian heartbeat?” Liliy asked. She tapped a key on the computer next to her.

The tremor data points converted to audio files. The pulsing sound filled the room, making everyone uneasy.

“How is that possible?” asked June. “A heart pumps blood. There’s nothing inside the Earth to pump except…”

“…The blood of Unicron,” Raf voiced what they all realized.

“Ok, hold on,” Miko said after a moment of stunned silence. “You mean something’s living down there? Inside our planet?”

“I fear that the Earth’s very core is not comprised of magma as your science has suggested,” said Optimus, “but of dark energon.”

“And if we’re hearing a spark,” said Ratchet, “then Unicron is the ‘rising darkness’ that the prophecy foretold.”

“So, how do we stop this thing from rising?” asked Fowler.

“That, I am afraid, was not foretold,” answered Optimus.

“How can something be in our Earth’s core? And be alive?” June wanted to know.

“Such a thing is not unheard of. At least, in Cybertronian history.” Liliy received several confused looks. “What? I’m pretty sure I mentioned that I studied linguistics. Figuring out how to read Cybertronian wasn’t that difficult. And your old history was quite interesting.”

“Then why don’t you share what you learned,” replied Ratchet. “And Optimus can correct you if you are mistaken.”

“Hhh. Fine.” Liliy moved over to the railing of the top tier so that she could be seen and heard by everyone. “So way back before the beginning, there were two beings, Primus who was Creation and Unicron who was Destruction. They were always fighting each other. Finally, Primus got fed
up and created 13 warriors, the original Primes, to help him defeat Unicron. They did. And then they cast him out. After that, Primus became one with the core of Cybertron and created life through the Well of AllSparks. And Unicron was never to be heard from again… Until now.” She looked up at Optimus. “How was that?”

“‘You are basically correct,’” he replied.

“Maybe we can we can the hole this uber Con left when he dug himself all the way down there and fill it full of explosives,” said Fowler.

Lily just facepalmed while Optimus and Ratchet shared a look.

“Agent Fowler, I do not believe Earth became Unicron’s home but rather that with time and gravitational force, debris collected around the slumbering titan…” Optimus explained.

Ratchet finished for him. “..Forming your Earth itself.”

“And he’s only awakening now due to the magnetic pull created by the planetary alignment,” realized Arcee.

“Ok. But what happens now when Unicron wakes up from his billion year nap?” asked Jack.

“Yeah. Does he stretch and Kapow!” Miko spread her arms to mimic an explosion. “Earth poofs to dust?”

Prime remained silent.

“You don’t know, do you?” asked June.

“My guess is that Unicron has transcended physical form as we know it,” said Optimus. “Nonetheless, we must find a way to ensure that this force of nature never fully awakens. The fate of your planet depends upon it.”

Optimus went off by himself to check out the epicenters of the earthquakes. Lily thought it was a bad idea but kept it to herself because she knew Prime probably wouldn’t listen to her. She could sense Unicron’s spark just as well as she could sense the sparks of the Autobots around her and it disturbed her. She felt like she was trapped inside another Cybertronian’s alt, too close to their spark with no way to escape. To keep herself grounded, she sat in one of the computer chairs and swiveled back and forth.

[Ratchet, this epicenter is consistent with the findings of the others. Its terrain is rich in ore.] Optimus commed back after checking another epicenter.

“So what does that tell us?” asked Fowler.

“It follows that the natural metals in your Earth would be extensions of Unicron,” said Ratchet. “His limbs, if you will.”

“So, he did have his morning stretch, which it why these quakes happened,” commented June.

The computer started beeping.

“Optimus, I’m detecting a swell in Unicron’s spark activity,” Ratchet said after checking the readings.
Ratchet waited a few minutes and then commed the Prime again. “Optimus, have you uncovered any further sign of Unicron’s emergence?”

Several voices speaking in unison filtered thru the comm.

“I take that as a yes. We are on our way.” Ratchet turned to go to the ground bridge.

Prime’s voice stopped him. {Unicron cannot be defeated by sheer force. He wants me, Ratchet. This fight must be mine alone.}

Optimus did a slight misstep when he heard Liliy yell ‘Idiot-’ as he dropped call. Was she talking about him? He didn’t have time to wonder as he engaged Unicron’s manifestations.

“Did you just call Optimus an idiot?” asked Arcee.

“Yes,” answered Liliy. “And all of you are idiots too if you plan on actually listening to him and staying here.”

“But you heard him, Liliy,” said Ratchet. “And he is our leader.”

“We want to help him,” added Bulkhead, “but like Ratchet said, he is our leader.”

“But sometimes you have to disobey the leader when you know they are doing something stupid,” countered Liliy. “I know this because I have done some stupid stuff as a leader and had to have my aft rescued. Unicron wants to kill Optimus because he is a Prime. And it was the original Primes who cast Unicron out in the first place, right?”

“Yes,” answered Ratchet.

“Then there may be a way for Optimus to stop Unicron but I don't think it's by fighting his manifestations. The best thing you can do right now is fight to keep him alive until another solution can be found.” Liliy activated the ground bridge via the computer next to her. “If you aren't going to go help him, I will.”

That was all the prompting that the Bots needed. Bumblebee and Bulkhead followed Arcee thru the open portal.

To be continued…
The Autobots came out the other side of the portal just in time. Unicron had Optimus pinned down and was getting ready to slay him. The Bots engaged the manifestations.

“Did Ratchet not relay my command?” asked Optimus of Arcee as soon as he had a moment to breath. “Return to base.”

“Reinforcements will not prevent your destruction, disciple of Primus,” Unicron called.

“He did,” answered Arcee, shooting another Unicron. “But then Lily chewed us out, calling us idiots-you included-and threatened to come help you in our stead.”

{Optimus, can you hear me?}

“I hear you, Lilyy.”

{If you don't survive, neither will this planet. And I kind of like it here. Stop being an aft and let your friends help you.}

“Did she really just…?” asked Bulkhead after punching a manifestation in the face.

“She did,” replied Acree with smirk as she blasted another one.

“Very well,” Optimus relented after a moment of thought. “They may lead.”

“Alright! Let’s move!” commanded Arcee.

They fought their way out of the canyon and onto level ground, only to encounter a gigantic manifestation. Their efforts to take it down were proving useless and Optimus was once again on the verge of being crushed. Out of nowhere, shots were fired at the manifestation’s helm and it crumbled.

“Who did that?” asked Bumblebee as he and Bulkhead got up.

“Wasn’t me.” Arcee joined them.

“Me neither,” said Bulkhead.

“Ratchet?” Arcee commed.

{What is it? What happened?}

“I happened.” Megatron appeared on top of the pile of rocks that used to be Unicron’s manifestation. He leapt to the ground with ease.

“Megatron!” exclaimed Bulkhead.

“King Con’s there too?” asked Miko.

“He has aligned himself with Unicron,” said Ratchet.
{Don’t be so sure. Megatron just saved Optimus’ tailpipe.} replied Arcee.

That surprised everyone back at base.

Optimus pushed himself out of the rubble and looked up when Megatron’s ped came into view. Megatron pointed his blaster at Optimus. The Bots activated their own blasters and aimed at him. Instead of shooting Optimus, he turned his arm and offered his servo. Optimus looked at the servo and then accepted it, letting Megatron pull him to his pedes. The Bots relaxed slightly.

“It is rather ironic,” said Megatron, turning and moving a few steps away, “considering our last encounter.” He looked back at Optimus. “If memory serves, you were desperately attempting extinguish my spark.”

“That option remains very much in play,” Optimus replied, closing the gap between them.

“I would expect nothing less. However, I have a proposal.” Megatron moved away again, his servos clasped behind his back. “Join me in defeating our shared enemy: Unicron the Chaos Bringer.”

{Ha! Absurd! Unicron is evil incarnate. If Megatron was to take any side, why would it be ours?} asked Ratchet.

“Because Megatron’s pride would never allow anyone other than himself to rule this planet,” answered Optimus.

“You know me all too well, Optimus,” said Megatron.

“You lead an army of Cons, why come to us?” asked Bulkhead.

{Seriously, Bulk?} said Liliy. {Were you not listening earlier? It takes a Prime to defeat Unicron. And we have the only one. That is why he’s there.}

“Exactly.” Megatron didn’t know who had spoken but they knew what he wanted.

“Hah. Then I guess we don’t need you,” said Bulkhead.

“On the contrary, Optimus maybe the only one who can defeat Unicron, but I remain the only one who can guide you to him,” Megatron countered. “Unicron’s life blood runs thru me. Only I can hear his thought, anticipate his movements. Optimus, our past alliances, Autobot, Decepticon, no longer matter, not while Unicron lives.”

Ratchet slammed his fist down on the console. “The past always matters!”

“But he has a point, Ratchet,” said Liliy, even though she could hardly believe that she was actually agreeing with Megatron.

Ratchet shot a glare at her.

“A truce between Autobot and Decepticon. How long do you expect us to believe that will last?”
asked Optimus.

“Only as long as is mutually beneficial,” said Megatron.

“And, when our proposed shared mission is complete?”

“I will conquer this Earth, my way.”

“Brutal honesty from a Decepticon?” Arcee commented.

{Aligning with the lesser of two evils is still siding with evil.} said Ratchet.

“Do you think you’ve witnessed the full power of Unicron?” asked Megatron. “Those foot soldiers were nothing more than a taste. Unicron has yet to fully awaken. With each passing moment the Bringer of Chaos evolves. Mutating Earth from inside out. What we have witnessed until now has been but a prelude to the utter devastation his rising will wreak upon this world.”

“Like your quest for power destroyed Cybertron?” inquired Arcee.

“Make no mistake,” he snapped. “This time there will be a planet left for me to rule.”

“Even if we agree, Unicron’s all the way down at the center of the Earth. How are we supposed to get there? Drive?” Bulkhead wanted to know.

{There is only one way.} Optimus replied.

“Ground bridge,” said Lily.

“Absolutely not!” exclaimed Ratchet. “Getting you out into space was difficult enough! Plotting a blind jump to inside a sentient being? Impossible! And besides, direct exposure to that much dark energon will debilitate you. You haven’t built up an immunity like Megatron has.”

“Yet another strong argument for soliciting my guidance,” said Megatron.

“You can provide Unicron’s exact coordinates?” asked Optimus.

“If you transport us to this planet’s core, I can lead you directly into Unicron’s spark. The very heart of his darkness.”

“Optimus, even if we survive the jump, how are we supposed to stop Unicron?” asked Arcee.

Optimus looked to Megatron. The warlord gave a single nod.

“With the Matrix of Leadership,” Prime finally answered.

“What is that?” asked Fowler.

“A vessel of pure energy. The collective wisdom of the Primes,” answered Ratchet, turning to look at him.
“It was given to Optimus when he became a Prime. Or at least that is how I understood it,” added Liliy.

“That is correct. And even now, he carries it within him,” said Ratchet, thumping his fist on his chestplates.

{It was the combined power of the Primes that defeated Unicron so long ago. The very reason he now seeks to destroy you.)} Megatron said to Optimus.

{It would follow that releasing the power of the Matrix directly into Unicron’s spark would return him to stasis.)} Optimus added.

“Hold on,” Miko interrupted. “If everything ‘goes right’, Unicron’s gonna stay down there?”

“Yeah. Can’t we siphon him out somehow?” asked Jack.

“He’s not in the Earth’s core, Jack. He is the Earth’s core,” said Raf.

“Rafael is correct. Tampering with your core could affect the magnetic poles,” explained Ratchet. “Trigger the very cataclysmic events we are attempting to remedy. Tragically, Unicron is your planet’s very seed. Always has been. And always must be.”

Another of the giant manifestations began to form.

“We got another one,” said Bulkhead.

“Ratchet, send a ground bridge,” ordered Optimus.

“Wait. We’re opening a direct path into our base with Megatron standing right there?” asked Arcee after the portal opened behind them.

“And seriously, he’s going to risk his own spark to save us?” commented Bulkhead.

Megatron laughed. “Hardly my nature.” He turned to Optimus. “Consider my offer. I shall keep it busy.” He transformed and flew towards the manifestation.

“Glad to see that you’re not that big of an idiot, Optimus,” said Liliy after all the Autobots returned.

“Liliy!” admonished Ratchet.

“So I wasn’t just hearing things earlier,” said Optimus with a frown.

Liliy smirked. “That’s right. Besides that, what’s the plan with Megatron? By the way, were you guys having a serious conversation or was he flirting with you a little? With the way some of my brothers flirt, I really couldn’t tell.”

There was that ‘Liliy’s talking nonsense again’ look from everyone. Though, Optimus’ expression carried a hint of surprise too.

Liliy threw up her hand. “Hey, alright. T.M.I. Back to the plan.”

Ratchet cleared his throat. “Anyway, Optimus. I know that desperate times call for desperate
measures, but bringing Megatron here?"

“How can you even think about letting that monster near these children after what he did to Raf?” demanded June.

“He will be closely monitored and only be allowed to linger long enough to send us on our journey,” Optimus assured her. “Not one moment more.”

“What’s going to stop the Con from calling in an air strike if he knows where you live?” asked Fowler.

“By ground bridging Megatron here, he will be unable to get a fix on our coordinates.”

“Optimus, what’s going to happen to you when all your Matrix energy’s released?” Jack wanted to know.

“The power within the Matrix has not previously been utilized in this particular manner.”

“But you have an idea, don’t you?”

Optimus didn’t give him an answer. Instead, he turned to the other Bots. “Autobots, if humankind is to be saved, I have no choice but to proceed. But you do.”

“Well, I don’t know about humankind but I’m willing to do it,” said Bulkhead. “For Miko.”

“For Jack,” added Arcee.

“For Raf,” whirred Bumblebee.

“Well then,” said Liliy, “if we’re going to do this, let’s get it over with.”

Optimus went to the comm. “Megatron. We are sending transport.”

{You can always be relied upon to listen to reason, Optimus.}

“Before he gets here, all humans need to go hide in the hallway,” instructed Ratchet.

All the humans followed Ratchet’s orders except for Liliy who still hadn’t left the computer chair and Miko who made a fuss.

“Ugh. No fair. I’ve never seen him,” she complained as Ratchet pushed her toward the hallway next to the medbay with his servo. “Why do we have to hide?”

“Because I said so.”

Miko reluctantly joined the others.

Liliy sat back in the chair and realized that she hadn’t even flinched when she had heard Megatron’s voice on the comms. And now that he was on his way, she realized she felt nothing toward him. Either she was over him or the fear caused by Unicron’s spark was overriding her fear of Megatron. It turned out neither was quite true when she heard his steps approaching. A slight tremor ran down her spine as she turned the chair around and saw him standing there, optics glowing purple.

“So… this is where the magic happens?” he said, glancing around. “Quaint.”
Raf ran out of hiding. “You!”

“Ah! You’re looking much better than the last time we met, little one. Humans. Resilient.”

“Come on, Raf.” Jack pulled on the younger boy’s arm. “He isn’t worth it.”

Raf let himself be guided away by June.

“And you,” said Megatron as Jack turned away. “I never forget a face. Even that of a human. You never did tell me who was with you. I know it wasn’t an Autobot.”

Jack just walked away without a word.

“You double-cross anyone, mine is the face you’ll never forget. NEVER!” Miko yelled before Agent Fowler picked her up and carried her away.

“Ratchet, obtain the destination coordinates from our guest,” said Optimus.

Megatron moved over to the ground bridge controls with Ratchet. Liliy glared up at him.

“What are you looking at?” he asked, noticing her.

“A dead mech walking if anything happens to the Autobots after you put Unicron back to sleep,” she replied calmly, which surprised her. She wanted nothing more than to run away from him but she just sat frozen in the chair.

“Hmh. You’re as feisty as that other human.”

Liliy smirked. “You have no idea.” Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Optimus following Jack. “Excuse me.” It took some effort but she got up from the chair and turned her back on Megatron. She went around to the top tier and then down the stairs to the hallway. She could feel Megatron’s optics the entire time as she fought to keep a human’s walking pace.

“Will you keep something for me?” Optimus was kneeling just inside the hallway, looking down at Jack.

“Sure.”

Optimus pulled out an item that Liliy recognized as a specialized key card. As he held it out to Jack, it transformed down into a smaller size.

“What is it?” Jack asked as he took it.

“It is… the key to the ground bridge power supply.”

Liliy frowned. There was no such thing. What was Optimus really giving him? The key was obviously something of great importance, if Optimus had to lie about it.

“Ok. But shouldn’t Ratchet have this?”

“Perhaps,” Optimus replied slowly, looking for the right words to convince the boy. “But I have been impressed by how much you have matured since we first met. As such I feel you have earned the responsibility of safeguarding this important device. Until I return.”

“I won’t let you down,” said Jack.
Liliy stepped out of the hallway as Optimus stood. He walked by without noticing she was there. She followed him with her eyes until she noticed Megatron was staring at her again while he waited next to the active ground bridge.

“Locked and ready,” Ratchet informed Optimus.

Megatron looked down at Arcee as she stepped closer.

“You first.” She gestured at the ground bridge.

Servo on his chestplates, he bowed to her. “As you wish.” And then he entered the portal.

The Autobots took one last fond look at the humans who had come out of hiding to see them off before they followed him. Liliy removed her cloak and went and dropped it on her chair before following the Bots into the bridge just before it closed. She had to stop short on the other side to avoid running past them.

The place they entered was huge. It was made of dark metal and purple biolights glowed everywhere. Some of them that looked like veins in the metal pulsed with the sparkbeat.

“So, how long before Unicron knows we’re here?” asked Arcee.

“Make no mistake,” Megatron replied. “He already does.”

They started walking away. Liliy heard a noise and looked up. An enormous optic took up practically the entire ceiling. It rolled around in its socket, searching. Then it looked straight down at her. She felt her energon run cold. She ran after the Bots.

Liliy was glad when they entered a tunnel and were out of sight of the giant optic. She transformed into her root mode. While technically built to withstand the effects of red energon and hyperspeed, her systems were straining under the added effects of the dark energon and the closeness of Unicron’s spark. Her root mode allowed for better airflow and maneuverability.

Ahead of her and the Bots, Megatron stopped suddenly and grabbed his helm, grunting. Optimus stepped hesitantly toward him as he dropped to one knee. He opened his optics.

“Unicron grows ever stronger.”

He stood and glanced back at Optimus before continuing on.

“How do we know that Unicron isn’t using Megatron to lead us all into a trap?” asked Arcee.

“We do not,” Optimus replied as he followed Megatron again.

They walked on until the tunnel opened up into another large area. It appeared to be huge tunnel spanned by walkways.

“Unicron’s spark is near,” announced Megatron.

Arcee took a few steps out onto the walkway and looked around. She turned back to Megatron. “After you.”

Megatron led the way. Optimus followed him. The other three brought up the rear. Bulkhead stopped and groaned, grabbing his helm.

“Bulkhead, you ok?” Bumblebee asked from behind him.
“Fine, Bee. Just woozy.”


Arcee and Bumblebee helped Bulkhead along. Megatron stopped and turned back to Optimus.

“He’s preparing to expel us.”

They heard the shrieking of the small mechanical creatures before they appeared. The creatures swarmed in the air around the bots.

“What are those things?” asked Bulkhead, as he and the other two activated their blasters.

“As we are in Unicron’s body,” replied Optimus, “it stands to reason they are some sort of anti-body.” He activated his blasters as well.

The creatures prepared to attack. The bots opened fire and the creatures fired back. The creatures were everywhere. Liliy hung back by the tunnel with her staff at the ready in case she needed to defend herself. Arcee had to leap over a creature and ended falling to a walkway lower down. Bulkhead became woozy again and staggered to the side. His servo caught the edge as he fell but it didn’t hold for long. Bumblebee noticed and was able to catch his servo in time but he did not have the strength to pull Bulkhead back up.

“Bee, let me go. I’ll only take you down with me.”

Bumblebee struggled to hold on while Optimus and Megatron continued to fight. They knocked the creatures out of the air by alternating between blades and blasters and the occasional ped or fist.

“Just let go, kid,” Bulkhead said as Bumblebee’s grip on his digits slipped again.

“BULKHEAD!”

Acree’s cry alerted Optimus. He was there in time to catch Bulkhead after he slipped out of Bumblebee’s grasp.

“I got ya,” he said as he pulled Bulkhead back up onto the walkway.

They ran for the next tunnel.

“Arcee!” Optimus called.

Arcee got back up to the others by hitching a ride on one of the creature. Liliy crossed the walkway to catch up to them.

The tunnel led to a small room with a door. The creatures were dropping like flies around the bots. Liliy did her best to stay out of sight. The creatures seemed more interested in the larger beings and paid her no mind.

While the others continued to fight, Megatron froze, his optics wide. He gave a cry and fell into a crouch as he fought Unicron for control.

“Megatron,” said Optimus.

He grabbed his helm and yelled. Then he lunged at Optimus, only to shove him aside and blast a creature that was behind him.
“Unicron’s spark lies just beyond.” He pointed at the heavy door at the back of the room.

“How do we get inside?” asked Optimus, all the while shooting at the creatures.

“By fooling Unicron’s defenses into believing we’re not a threat.” The insignia on Megatron’s chest glowed even brighter as he turned to the door. It opened for him and he entered.

“Autobots, I will need you to keep our attackers at bay for as long as you can,” Optimus ordered.

He paused to shoot down another creature, giving Liliy enough time to get past the door too. The door instantly shut behind Optimus, cutting off the sounds of fighting.

Optimus caught up with Megatron and stared up at the giant purple spark that floated before them. The sheer size and power was almost overwhelming. Megatron turned to him.

“Optimus, shiftly.”

Optimus moved forward but as he drew closer to the spark, the field around it shifted, sending out a wave of energy that struck him in the chassis and he collapsed to his knees.

The wave hit Megatron and he collapsed as well. Purple light like flames sprang from his optics as he grabbed his helm. Then he threw back his helm and gave an agonized scream. He seemed to struggle against himself as he got to his pedes and activated his blade.

Liliy was helpless and could only watch as Megatron approached Optimus because the force of the spark kept her against the wall.

Megaton raised his blade to strike but he struggled. When the blade finally did come down, he stopped it with his other servo and forcibly deactivated it.

“Megatron is commanded BY NO ONE!!” he roared, flinging his arms wide, the flames gone from his optics.

The spark flared and the floor trembled. Megatron’s servos went to his helm again and he dropped knees, screaming. Unicron’s face appeared around the spark as Megatron offlined and collapsed to the floor.

Optimus raised his head. “Matrix of Leadership, I call upon you.”

Suddenly the purple flames covered Megatron’s entire body as it rose from the floor.

“You cannot defeat me, disciple of Primus,” Unicron’s voice said, overlapping with Megatron’s. “I have transcended physical being. By my will alone, all upon this world shall fall into chaos.”

“Not while I still function, Unicron.” Optimus slowly stood up. “The power of the Matrix will light our darkest hour.”

“NOOOO!” screamed Unicron, charging Megatron’s blaster and aiming for Optimus.

He never got the chance to fire because energy quickly collected around the Prime and when he released it, Megatron’s body was thrown back. Energy rings danced around Optimus as the power of the Matrix shot from his open chassis and into Unicron’s spark. Smoke poured off Optimus as his chestplates shifted closed and he collapsed, all his energy gone.

Unicron screamed as the pure energy battled his spark. It expanded out as it overwhelmed him and then spark was extinguished in a rain of purple embers.
In the darkness left behind, Liliy collapsed to her knees, trembling. Her systems were slow to recover. She heard Megatron groan and rise. His optics shone red once again as he looked toward Optimus.

“Teamwork. Hmh.” He activated his blade and advanced on Optimus.

Pushing herself to move, Liliy was halfway across the space when Optimus lifted his helm, looked around, and then said something that brought both her and Megatron to a halt.

“Where are we, Megatronus?”

Understanding instantly what happened, Megatron deactivated his blade and offered his servo. Optimus did not hesitate to grasp it and Megatron pulled him upright.

“Don’t you remember, old friend?” Megatron asked as Optimus retracted his battle mask.

The confused expression on his face told Liliy all she needed and her spark twisted with the realization that his memories were gone. She sensed the sparks of the other Autobots approaching even before they were trying to bust down the door. She sped past Megatron and ducked behind Optimus’ ped, hoping he would be too confused and distracted to notice her.

Bulkhead finally busted down the door and entered the chamber with Arcee and Bumblebee right behind him.

“Optimus, are you ok?” Bulkhead wanted to know.

“Why did he call me that?” Optimus asked, confused.

The Bots stopped when they realized something was wrong.

“What did you do to him?” demanded Arcee.

“Who are they?” Optimus did not recognized them.

A ground bridge opened behind Optimus.

“Our mortal enemies,” Megatron said. He pushed Optimus toward the portal. “We’re out numbered. Go! I’ll cover you.”

Liliy latched onto Optimus’ leg as he ran for the bridge. Megatron fired shots to distract the Autobots. Optimus paused in front of the portal and looked back. Bumblebee beeped at him but he simply turned and entered the ground bridge with Megatron close behind.

Once on the Nemesis, Liliy let go of Optimus’ leg and disappeared into the nearest vent. Even though she was drained from her encounter with Unicron’s spark, there was no time to relax. She was in enemy territory now.
Liliy was exhausted and it was starting to get the better of her. She stumbled against the wall with a faint clatter. It was enough to cause Orion to cease typing. He approached the console she was hiding under and crouched. She wasn't quite fast enough and he saw her hide in the vent.

"Wait," he said gently. "Please come out. I mean you no harm."

Since she was back in her human guise, Liliy decided to play the part of a timid fleshling and simply peeked out.

"You won't squash me?" she asked fearfully.

Orion looked rather horrified at the thought and shook his helm. "No. I will not squash you. I promise."

She stepped out of her hiding spot but kept her back against the wall, ready to spring back in if he tried to get her.

"Are you an inhabitant of this planet?" he asked, curiously, his optics observing her features from head to toe.

"Yes." It made her slightly uncomfortable the way he stared but she knew that this was his ‘first time’ encountering a human.

"How did you get on the ship?"

"Uh…” Right. Timid fleshling who knows nothing about Cybertronians. “I don't know… It was bright and green and noisy and the next thing I knew I was here."

"The ground bridge?"

She shrugged. "I… guess?"

He turned to get up. "I shall contact Lord Megatron and have him-"

"No!" she cried, stepping closer and holding out her hand.

He looked back at her. "Why not? Would you not be happier back on your planet?"

"The other robots are scary." Liliy sincerely hoped that when Optimus got his memories back he would not remember this moment because she felt completely foolish.

Orion’s optic ridges slid closer together. "Are you talking about the Autobots?"

"I’m talking about the big silver one who comes to talk to you and the purple one without a face." Even though she felt foolish saying it out loud, it was not a lie. Megatron and Soundwave really did scare her.

"Lord Megatron and Soundwave. They will not hurt you.” He turned to rise again. “I can-"

"No!" she cried, more desperate this time. “You must not tell them that I am here. Please! I don't-" Her recharge warning chimed in her processor. She had to rest or her body would force a shutdown and she could not afford that. "I have to go."
She slipped back into the vent and followed the air shaft around to a vent above the door that allowed her to see almost the entire room. She recharged lightly, her visor and sensors recording everything that Orion did and they were set to bring her fully back online if someone else entered the room.

So there was native on the ship. They were an intelligent being and afraid of him. Or so Orion thought. He was somewhat torn about reporting them to Megatron but the way they had begged him, their small eyes wide with fear, their voice desperate. Besides, he did not know where they were now because he was sure that they were no longer in that vent under the console. Perhaps later he would do some research about the planet where they were. Surely that information was somewhere in the ship’s archives. For now though, he went back to decoding the Iacon database.

Some hours later, Liliy ventured out onto the console where Orion was working. She leaned against the keyboard that was raised to better accommodate the archivist’s height.

"Hey."

His digits stopped typing as he looked down at her in surprise. "Hello."

"Sorry about earlier. I was just really tired and needed to rest."

"I understand." So that is why she ran from him. He was definitely glad she came out again. He wanted to talk to her.

"My name is Liliy. What’s yours?" Her tone was friendly and curious.

"I am called Orion Pax."

"Hunter of peace, huh… You seem like you might be one. But I’m just gonna call you O.P.."

’Hunter of peace’? He was not sure what she meant by that but he was more interested in: "Why can you not call me by my name?"

"Because those are your initials no matter who you are. This way I don't have differentiate." So maybe she wasn’t such an ignorant fleshling. This was going to come back and bite her, she just knew it.

Orion was about to ask what she meant when the door slid open behind him and she ducked under the keyboard. It was just a vehicon wanting to know if Pax needed anything. Orion said no and sent him away.

"So, can I ask what you are working on?" she asked, coming out of hiding as he turned back to the console. She changed the subject so he would forget to ask about his name.

"I am decoding entries from the Iacon database," he replied.

Good, it worked. “What’s Iacon?”

“IT was a great city on Cybertron. I worked in the Hall of Records there. That is where this database is from.”

“Cybertron? Is that your planet?”
He hesitated, still not quite believing what Megatron had told him about Cybertron’s demise. “It was.”

She tilted her head and frowned. “Was?”

He closed his optics, remembering the images of the destroyed cities and lifeless, gray landscape. “It is a dead planet now.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. So why are you here on our planet?”

“That I am still unsure about but I was hoping that these entries might provide some answers. I just have to decode them.” He looked at the glyphs on the monitor.

"Sounds hard," she said, turning to stare up at the big monitor while he started typing again.

"It is rather time consuming, but it is not bad."

They fell into a comfortable silence for a while. Liliy watched the glyphs scroll across the monitor and listened to the continuous ‘tap tap’ of Orion’s digits on the keys. Orion would glance down at her every so often but she never noticed.

"Liliy."

His deep voice startled her as it always tended to do when they were alone together. She looked up at him. He had stopped typing again to focus on her.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Why do you hide from the other Decepticons but not from me?"

"Well, you're just full of questions, aren't you, O.P.. I guess it is because you are different from them. Obvious fact: your eyes are blue. But they are also kind compared to the others. Your presence is intimidating but… soothing, comforting, reassuring at the same time. I feel safe with you. The title of Decepticon does not really fit you. Just sayin'."

“Why not?”

“Because decepticon sounds like deception and if you were a liar, you would’ve already told the big silver guy that I was here."

“How do you know that I have not?”

“I don’t really but I just have a feeling.” She stared up at him with an innocent expression while internally daring him to contradict her.

“You are right. I have not. I do not know why you are afraid of Lord Megatron, but I promise that I will not tell him or any of the others that you are here.”

Liliy smiled with relief. “In that case, would you mind if I stayed here for a while?”

Orion was surprised by her offer but he smiled back. “I would like that very much.”

Liliy stood next to Orion’s ped and stared up at him, wondering how hard it would be to actually try to climb up to his shoulder as a human would. Getting up his calf was fairly easy. There were
several uneven parts that made good hand and foot holds. Liliy balanced on top of his tire next to his knee and looked up again. Orion seemed oblivious of her, too absorbed in his work. The side of his thigh was mostly smooth save for a couple transformation seams and the hole where his hip joint attached. Bracing on the edge of the hole and pushing off the lower seam with her foot, she got enough upward momentum to quickly reach up and grab the blue armor at the top of his hip.

Orion yelped. Startled, Liliy let go and slid back down to his tire, but she landed wrong and the wheel rotated, sending her all the way to the floor. He looked down at her, more startled than she was. One servo covered his mouth and the other was on the affected hip. She stared at him for a moment before she started giggling.

“That was not funny!” Orion grumbled. “What were you doing?”

“I’m sorry,” she replied, trying not to laugh as she got to her feet. “I was just trying to get up to your shoulder. I didn’t realize you were so sensitive there.”

“Neither did I,” he mumbled. Air moved thru his vents in the Cybertronian equivalent of a huff. “If you want sit on my shoulder, then just ask me to pick you up.” He knelt down and offered his servo.

Liliy hesitated, though she wasn't sure why. She often used her ‘boys’ servos as a mode of transportation and was used to them picking her up for a shoulder ride. She looked up at Orion. He smiled encouragingly, as patient as ever. There was no reason not to trust him. She trusted Optimus and they were essentially the same person. She stepped closer to his servo. Besides, he had kept his promise so far and did not tell anyone else that she was there. She sat down on the black metal. Her legs hung over the edge of his palm and she took hold of one of his half curled digits, careful not to get her fingers too close to his joints.

“Lift me up please,” she said once she was comfortable.

He did so slowly. He was careful not to jostle her as he stood up and raised her to his shoulder.

“Any sensitive parts up here that I should avoid?” she asked as her feet settled on the top edge of his chestplates.

There was no armor on the top of his shoulder leaving some nonessential inner workings exposed and she had to step carefully to avoid getting her feet caught in any gaps. She sat down on the first layer of his back armor but didn’t quite lean back against the tire there because she knew that sometimes it rotated when he moved.

“You are fine right there,” he replied.

“This is some view you’ve got up here,” Liliy said as she assessed her surroundings from this new angle. “Makes everything in the room seem… less big.”

Orion simply hummed in response as he returned to his task.

“Liliy, I have been wondering.” Orion looked down at her sitting near him on the console.

“About what?” Her phone settled in her lap as she gave him her undivided attention.

“According to my research,” he gestured at the monitor covered in glyphs, “humans are supposed to have two arms like most Cybertronians, but you only have one. Why is that?”
Liliy covered her empty shoulder with her hand as she looked away. He _had_ to go and bring up a painful subject, didn’t he? Especially considering where they were. But, of course, he didn’t know better.

“I lost it… a long time ago.”

If he did notice that the subject made her uncomfortable, he did not show it. He spoke again with an archivist’s curiosity.

“As I understand it, your limbs are harder to replace because of your organic makeup. Unlike Cybertronians.”

She huffed, annoyed that he would suggest that all Cybertronian biology could be replaced. “In some rare cases, our original limbs can be reattached, depending on how they were removed. I was not so fortunate. And who says all Cybertronian parts can be replaced?”

Orion opened his mouth to say it was common knowledge but then he remembered they were at war and their planet was dead. “I suppose that supplies have become limited because of the war and certain parts would be harder to find.”

“Oh ha! See? Even you guys aren’t perfect.”

She was half tempted to vaguely mention Bumblebee but he probably wouldn’t understand and she wasn’t supposed to know so much about anything Cybertronian. Even though she basically admitted she knew _something_ when she decided to call him O.P..

“That is true. Considering that our war has led to the death of our planet, we are far from perfect. But I am surprised that your world has survived after everything your kind has put it through.”

What do you expect of a world forged from Chaos? “Humans have short life spans. No one ever lives long enough to see the destruction through.”

“I see. By the way, Liliy,” he changed the subject, “are you male or female?”

“I’m female. A woman.”

“And how old are you?”

“I’m in my twenties.” She didn’t like giving anyone a specific number because her default alt-mode was a female in her mid- to late-twenties. Every ten years or so she would hack into the humans’ databases and change her birth year to match her un-aging appearance.

“So you are still young then?”

“I am considered a fully matured adult but, yes, I am still ‘young’.”

“Are all humans around your stature?”

Liliy chuckled. “No. As far as humans go, I am at the tall end of the spectrum. Especially for a female. I tend to stand out like a sore thumb.”

“Sore thumb?”

“It means that I am really noticeable.”
Orion was in recharge. Unknown to him, Liliy had followed him to the room the Decepticons had set aside as his private quarters. She was not going to leave him alone, even there. They were simple officer’s quarters. Just a berth, a small table, couple of chairs, and a private washrack.

Liliy sat on top of the table. She was used to sitting such a place because it was a common occurrence when she was at home. That or she sat on Leecher’s shoulder so no one could accuse her of playing favorites. She smiled as she listened to yet another phone message from the children. She didn’t dare reply with anything more than a one or two word text in case Soundwave was intercepting her comm signal. And she refused to reply if they asked her direct question concerning anything Cybertronian for the same reason.

Liliy sighed. She missed the children. She missed the rest of the Bots too. She missed her ‘boys’ and Leecher. At least she occasionally got to see Ucon, but that was it. She couldn’t go near him or talk to him. She suddenly felt lonely. She really wanted to talk to someone but she didn’t want to get Ucon in trouble. She couldn’t call anyone outside the ship. And Orion needed his rest. She looked up at the mech on the berth. His chassis rose and fell evenly in quiet recharge. She may be lonely but at least she wasn’t totally alone.

When Orion woke up, there was an extra weight on his chassis. It was not heavy or anything. It was just extra. Whatever it was, it was below his windshields and he could not see it. He raised his servo and gently nudged the mass. It shifted on his plating and mumbled.

_Liliy!

Orion was both embarrassed and flattered that she had chosen to recharge with him. He carefully cupped his servo around her and sat up. Cradling her in both servos, he moved her away from his chassis.

Liliy shivered as her subconscious felt the other spark move away. She forced herself to open her eyes and she blinked at the black metal around her before she realized it was Orion’s servo.

“I apologize for waking you,” he said quietly.

Liliy sat up slowly and wouldn’t look at him. “It’s my fault. I didn’t mean to fall asleep there.”

“Oh. I see.” He sounded disappointed.

“I’m sorry.”

“I do not mind. I have… enjoyed spending time with you. And I am glad that you trust me.”

She put her hand flat on his palm. “Of course. That’s what friends do.”

Even though she smiled up at him when she said that, Orion felt that she was actually sad but he did not question it. He simply smiled back at her.

A set of blue glyphs sat apart from the red ones on the monitor.

“What is it?” Liliy asked, playing the role of the curious human, even though she could read it perfectly fine and knew what it was.
“I have finished decoding the first entry,” Orion answered.

“And?”

“And it appears to be a set of coordinates.”

“Oh. Are they for some place on my planet? Or a different one?”

“I am not sure.”

“Can you show me where they would be if they were on this planet?”

Orion tapped a few keys and a hologram of the globe appeared with a mark indicating the coordinates. He pointed at the flashing dot.

“It is here, in the southern hemisphere, just below the equator.”

“Oh. That’s in South America,” she said, recognizing the indicated landmass. “So there is a chance that the coordinates are for this planet since they are on land. But what do they mean? What are they for?”

Orion shrugged. “That is still unclear. Perhaps the next entry will reveal more.” He turned off the holo-globe and went back to decoding.

Liliy was sprawled across Orion’s windshield for recharge this time. But because of the way the glass was slanted, her feet were by his shoulder and her head was more or less over his spark. There was something that she had been wondering about.

“Hey, O.P..”

“Hmm?” he replied sleepily.

She rolled onto her side so she could see his helm. “What is the last thing you remember?”

He raised his helm to look at her, his optics dim with recharge but still visible in the darkness of the room. “What do you mean?”

“What is the last thing you remember before coming to this ship?”

He laid his helm back. “Well, I woke up in a strange place, not knowing where I was or what was going on. And then Megatron was there-”

“No. I mean before that. Before you woke up in the dark.”

Orion was quiet for so long that Liliy thought he might’ve actually gone into recharge because she couldn’t see the glow of his optics anymore.

“I can clearly remember working in the Iacon Hall of Records.” He voice was soft when he finally spoke. He opened his optics again to stare at the ceiling. “I remember meeting with Megatronus. I remember going before the council with him... But things start to get intermittent after that. There may have been some fighting. I do not know. I think the last thing I remember before waking up again was traveling to Cybertron’s core. But I cannot remember why.”

What a weird coincidence, losing oneself in Cybertron’s core, only to wake up in Earth’s. “It must
“have been important,” Liliy said as she rolled back onto her back. “Too bad you can’t remember more.”

“Apparently it was a long time ago. And I was locked in stasis the whole time.”

“Stasis?”

“I believe a human equivalent would be in a coma.”

“Oh... Well, I am glad you’re awake now. I mean, out of stasis.”

Orion hmmmed but did not speak.

“Good night, O.P..” Liliy tapped her fingers lightly on the glass underneath her and closed her eyes.

“Good night...” Orion brought one servo up and brushed a single digit over her hair. “...Liliy.”
"What's that noise?" Liliy had to ask even though she knew the answer, but she did so in an uncertain and almost frightened tone.

Orion had stopped working and turned to listen. He frowned. "It sounds like blaster fire... But we are on a ship. Who would be shooting?" He moved to the door.

"Whoa, whoa. You're not going out there, are you?"

"I am just going to check."

"What if somebody sees me?"

He froze, his servo hovering over the keypad for the door. He had obviously forgotten that she was sitting on his shoulder since she was there almost all the time now.

"Then hide quickly."

Sighing, she clambered over his tire and slipped between the layers of armor plating on his back. It wasn't the most ideal hiding spot but it provided her with some cover without having to leave his person. As an added precaution, she adjusted her hololayer to camouflage mode, turning herself nearly invisible. A feature that was only useful when she was not moving.

Orion stepped to the side of the door as he hit the keypad. He simply peeked out after the door slid open in case the commotion was right outside. There was no one in the hall but he heard the approach of pedfalls. Two vehicons came running around the corner, blasters activated. One of them stopped to address him.

"Orion, please return to your station. Megatron's orders," he said before running after his partner.

"Maybe you should do as he says," Liliy offered.

Orion ignored her as he stepped out into the hall. He wanted to know what was going on. He went down the hall in the direction of the blaster fire at a casual pace, just in case. He did not want to get caught in the trouble.

As they got closer, Liliy picked up on Arcee's spark signal. So that's who was causing all the ruckus. Then she noticed another spark, one that sent chills down her spine. Soundwave was ahead of them and he was going to intercept Arcee before they did.

Orion became very aware of his passenger when her grip on the edge of his plating suddenly tighten. The farther he went, the tighter it got. They were almost to a junction in the hallway. There was the sound of a high pitched motor approaching.

Liliy's sensors picked up the ground bridge before she heard it. Arcee's signal was practically right on top of Soundwave's before it suddenly disappeared. She bowed her head in disappointment. She was hoping that maybe Arcee would be able to at least get a glimpse of Optimus so that the Autobots would know that he was alright but they were too far away.

The grip on his plating was almost painful as Orion reached the junction and found Soundwave. He was unaware that the silent mech had just bridged an Autobot off the ship.
"I heard a commotion," he said, hoping for an explanation.

Soundwave just glanced at him and walked away. Orion watched him go, slightly disappointed. After he was sure that Soundwave was gone, Orion turned to head back to his station. The grip on his plating did not relax.

"Liliy, are you alright?" he asked quietly. "Your grip..."

Liliy looked at her hand. She hadn't realized her grip had gotten so tight. Bracing herself so she wouldn't slip, she let go with her hand. There were slight grooves in the plating where her fingers had been.

"I told you the robot without a face was scary." Her voice was barely a whisper.

"And you are strong for an organic."

"I'm sorry."

"It is alright. You are safe now."

They were back in Orion's work lab. Liliy climbed back up to Orion's shoulder.

"Did you know that that engine we heard belonged to a motorcycle?"

"A motorcycle?"

"It's a two-wheeled vehicle that humans use to get around."

"But why would a motorcycle be on the Nemesis?"

"No idea. Maybe it accidently got up here by using one of those bridge thingies like I did."

Orion looked thoughtful. "Perhaps."

Liliy was tired of the Nemesis. She was tired of hiding. After being on the Nemesis for two long months, she really wanted to go home. But she needed to get Optimus off the ship, she just didn't know how to do it. At least she knew that the Bots were still trying to find him. She laid her head back and sighed. She frowned. A familiar spark was approaching the room. One that she did not expect to find on the ship.

It was Starscream. He entered the room carrying a few large cubes of energon. Orion stopped working and turned to face him.

"Optimus Prime!" the seeker gasped, dropping the energon and aiming his missiles at the archivist.

"Oh boy," Liliy muttered, peeking out of her hiding place. This was probably not going to end well. Or maybe... the seeker could give Orion the push he needed.

"Please." Orion took a step back, clearly as startled as Starscream. "I mean no harm."

"Oh? Then, what are you doing here?" Starscream demanded.

"Research," Orion replied honestly. "For Lord Megatron."
"I-is this some kind of joke?"

"I do not understand."

Starscream looked surprised and lowered his arms.

"And why did you call me Optimus Prime?" Orion asked.

"Uuuh… why wouldn't I?" Starscream replied.

"Because my name is Orion Pax. I am far from being a Prime."

As Orion spoke, Starscream noticed the Decepticon insignia on his arm in place of the usual Autobot one.

"Ah. You…" Starscream searched for a suitable answer. "...reminded me of someone I once knew, that's all."

"You are Starscream."

"Yes," Starscream answered warily.

"Lord Megatron told me you had been terminated."

"Lord Megatron says many things, only some of which are true."

"You do not suggest that our leader would speak falsehoods?"

Starscream laughed. "You truly are being kept in the dark, aren't you?"

Orion moved closer to him so they were both standing in front of the door. "You speak in many riddles, Starscream. Please, tell me what it is that you know."

"And, in return…"

The door slid open to reveal eradicons in the hall. They aimed their blasters at the seeker.

"Starscream, surrender!" one ordered.

Starscream shrieked and quickly hid behind Orion.

"Hold your fire," Orion ordered.

Liliy couldn't really see what happened but Starscream suddenly transformed and blasted out of the room.

"Remain in the lab," said one of the eradicons in the hall.

"But, I-" Orion started.

The eradicon cut him off. "Lord Megatron's orders."

The door slide shut.

Liliy leaned out of the vent. "O.P.?"

He looked up at her. "Liliy."
"What just happened?"

"Starscream was here." He looked down at the door as if the seeker was standing there. "And he said that Lord Megatron has been lying to me."

"Well, the Mega-fellow does carry the title of Decepticon."

"But Lord Megatron said we were called that by the Autobots to demonize us even though we speak the truth."

"That was probably just another lie to deceive you." Starscream had already planted the seed of doubt in Orion's mind, Liliy just needed to help it take root.

"To what end?"

"Hiding the real truth."

"What is the truth?"

"That, my friend, is the real question. One that you must find the answer to."

Orion stared wide-opticed at the monitor as the image cleared.

"How could I possible be Optimus Prime?"

He leaned heavily on the console and stared absently at the keyboard.

"This cannot be true."

"Is something wrong, O.P.?" Liliy's voice asked from somewhere behind him.

Orion raised his head slightly, remembering what Liliy had said after she learned his name. He slowly turned to look at her. She stood in the middle of the floor, looking up at him with concern. He stepped toward her and knelt, offering her his servo. She did not hesitate to sit carefully on his palm and let him lift her off the floor.

"Liliy," he started hesitantly, almost afraid of what the answer was going to be, "why do you call me O.P.?"

She tilted her head. "What do you mean?"

"After you learned my name you said you would call me O.P. because those were my initials no matter who I was and that way you would not have to differentiate. What exactly did you mean by that?"

"I think you already know what I meant by that, O.P.."

"So you know about this?" He turned and pointed at the image on the monitor.

Liliy glanced at the image and looked back up at Orion, her face sad.

"All this time and you still don't remember anything, do you?"

That surprised him. "Remember?"
Her gaze went to his chestplates. "It would seem that when the power of the Matrix left you, it took everything, even your memories. You probably knew something like this might happen, so you..." realization dawned on her face, "...you gave that key card to Jack!"

"I did what? Who is Jack?"

Liliy ignored him and pulled out her phone. She only hesitated for a second. If Soundwave picked up on her comm, she would just have to deal.

"What are you doing?"

"Calling Jack," she said as she put the phone to her ear.

Jack left his cell phone sitting by the computers when he suited up for his trip to Cybertron. The remaining humans at the base were startled when it started ringing. June picked it up and looked at the caller ID.

"It's Liliy. I'll answer it." She flipped the phone open and turned on the speaker. "Hello?"

{Nurse Darby? Where's Jack?}

"He went to Cybertron with Arcee."

{Nurse Darby, who are you talking to?} asked Ratchet thru the comm.

"Liliy. She called Jack's phone."

{What does she want?}

{The key card that Optimus gave Jack,} Liliy asked, {what's it for?}

"Ratchet said it is the key to Vector Sigma," explained Raf.

{Vector Sigma?}

Faintly they heard Optimus' voice thru the phone. {Vector Sigma is on Cybertron. It is said to be where the collective wisdom of the Primes is stored.}

"Wait!" said Miko. "Was that Optimus just now?"

{Optimus?} asked Ratchet.

Liliy didn't reply right away. Instead they heard her speak in a muffled tone. {O.P., I think someone is coming. Put me down and at least pretend to be working. I'll explain more later.}

{Understood.}

There was some shuffling and a couple thuds.

{Ok. I'm alone now.} Her tone was soft. {Yes, that was Optimus. I am with him on the Nemesis, in case you guys hadn't figured that out yet. How did you get Jack to Cybertron?}

"The Autobots commandeered the Decepticons' space bridge," Raf answered.
"Well done. But how were you planning to get to Optimus after that?"

"We hadn't planned that far ahead yet," said Fowler. "But maybe, since you are with him, you could get him to come to us?"

"I'll see what I can do. Sorry. Megatron's here. Gotta go."

And she hung up.

"What is it? What did Liliy say?" asked Ratchet.

"She is on the Nemesis with Optimus and she said she'll see what she can do to get him to come to us."

Liliy peeked over the edge of her hiding spot and listened.

"Orion, have you made progress with Project Iacon?" Megatron asked as he paced into the room.

Orion turned from the console he had been pretending to work on. "It seems I am a bit rustier than I thought."

"Might that have anything to do with the nature of your after-hours research?" the warlord asked, turning also to face the archivist. "Did I fail to mention we would be tracking your activities?" He crossed the space and hit a button on Orion's console. The profile for Optimus Prime appeared.

Orion was silent for a moment. Then he made a decision. Looking at the warlord, he asked, "Why does history portray me siding with the Autobot aggressors? And why did Starscream call me a Prime?" He leaned forward slightly and gestured to himself. "I must know. Who am I?"

Liliy facepalmed. Megatron was not the person to ask.

The silver mech glared. "You are my clerk. Now get back to work and decode that database."

Orion straightened and glanced at the monitor.

"No," he said firmly, shaking his helm. "I would rather erase my findings than make them available for your questionable use."

Liliy smirked as one black digit pressed a key and the monitor went blank. That was their Optimus. Megatron glared at him as he turned from the console. But, as he walked away, the warlord started laughing. Orion looked back at him as he pushed a button and the data reappeared on the monitor, much to the surprise of Orion.

"Did you really think that we wouldn't be tracking and documenting every iota of your invaluable research?" Megatron wanted to know.

Liliy sighed. Figures.

The door slide open suddenly and Soundwave entered. Liliy pulled back. The communications officer brought up an image of Cybertron on his facemask. It showed a signal.

"One of our sentries was activated," Megatron asked, "on Cybertron?"

Well, scrap! The Bots have been discovered. Liliy needed to help Orion. She pulled out her phone and sent an encrypted message to Ucon asking for his help.
"You told me our planet was dead," insisted Orion.

"That is beside the point," growled Megatron.

He called for the guards and two vehicons entered.

"You will finish Project Iacon by the time I return," he commanded threateningly, activating his blade and forcing it to Orion's throat. "Or I will carve out your spark before your very optics."

Megatron deactivated his blade and pushed Orion aside as he headed for the door.

"Make sure he does his work," he ordered the guards as he and Soundwave left the room.

Orion watched him go and then slowly moved over to the main console. He typed away at the keys for several minutes slowing down as each one past until he finally stopped typing altogether.

"No one told you to stop, Pax," said one of the guards.

"You were right, Liliy," Orion said. "I am not suited to be a Decepticon."

"Who are you talking to?" asked the other guard as they activated their blasters.

Orion turned from the console and approached the guards. "We have to warn the Autobots."

"You're not going anywhere," said the closest vehicon as he punched the larger mech in the chassis. He hit Orion again, across his back with his blaster as he went down and then kicked him in the side for good measure.

Orion looked up at them fearfully.

"Are you going to get back to work now?"

"No…"

"Well then."

The other vehicon kicked him. They took turns kicking him after that. Liliy flinched with each strike Orion took. There was nothing she could do to help him without killing the vehicons.

"Hold on, O.P.," she whispered. "Help is coming."

The Cons stopped kicking him for a moment and Orion started to shakily crawl away from them.

"You have to admit," one said to the other, "it's a privilege to stomp the former leader of the Autobots."

Orion stopped and looked up at monitor where Optimus' profile was displayed. Liliy facepalmed again as dots were connecting in Orion's processor. He looked up at the Cons. The vehicon who spoke punched Orion in the face and sent him crashing into one of the computer console. As they advanced on him again, the door slide open. They turned to see a matte black eradicon stepping into the room, visor glowing bright orange.

"Who are you?" one vehicon demanded as they both activated their blasters again.

The eradicon, who already had both blasters activated, fired on them without warning. Both vehicons dropped to the floor, convulsing as electricity raked their systems. The eradicon had used
an electrical charge instead of a usual bolt since he did not want to kill them.

"What took you so long, Ucon?" Lily asked, coming out on the console that Orion sat against.

"Apologies, Madam. Sneaking away from my duties on this ship is not as easy as you think." He turned to Orion. "Are you alright, sir?"

Orion flinched when Ucon offered his servo but then he looked up. The eradicon’s mask was perched on top of his helm and he had a kind smile that was mirrored in his blue optics. Orion accepted the servo and the smaller mech pulled him to his pedes.

"You are not a Decepticon?" Orion asked.

"No. I work for the Cybertronian Rebel Corps. My job is to spy on the Decepticons from the inside. According to our intel, the Autobots have taken the Decepticon space bridge. Megatron left a little bit ago to go and get it back."

"We have to stop him. Can you help me?"

"'Fraid not. I have a cover to keep. The Autobots will be there though. You just need to go and help them."

"But I am unarmed."

Ucon raised an optic ridge. "Are you sure? Check your systems. Focus on your servos. You might be surprised."

Orion did as he was told and was utterly shocked when his servos turned into blasters.

"But how can this be?"

"You are an Autobot, O.P.," answered Lily. He looked down at her. "You are Optimus Prime. You just lost your memories. Your friends-your family," she corrected herself, "is working right now to get them back for you but it won't do them much good if you remain here. You need to go to them."

"Family?"

Lily smiled. "You will understand if you go."

"Alright."

Lily pulled out her phone again.

"What are you doing now?"

"Making another call." She put the phone to her ear. "Hey, Alfa. It's me. I need a ground bridge from my location on the Nemesis to the Decepticon space bridge."

A moment later, a ground bridge opened up on the other side of the room.

"Thanks a lot, Alfa." To Orion as she hung up the phone, "Go, O.P.. They are waiting for you."

Orion Pax hesitated for a moment. Then he stood up straight and marched into the ground bridge.

"Do you really think he'll be ok?" asked Ucon as the vortex spun shut.
"I certainly hope so," Liliy replied.

"What are you going to do now, Madam?"

"I'm going to go home, get some energon, and then probably recharge for a week straight. I am that tired. I've been running on light recharge and fumes since I got here."

"Well then, Madam, I wish you a good rest. I shall return to my duties now."

He turned and headed for the door, his paint job changing back to the customary Decepticon purple as he went.

"Ucon," Liliy called after him.

He paused and looked back at her. His optics had changed color too.

"Thank you for your help today. Please keep up the good work."

With a smile, he bowed.

"Your wish is my command."

Liliy smiled back as he pulled down his mask and left the room.

"Time to go home," she muttered, dropping her visor over her eyes. She paused before calling up her own bridge back to the CRC base. There was one last thing she needed to do. Going over to the main console, she brought up the Iacon database. It would be too risky to download it. Soundwave would immediately notice that. But there was nothing stopping her from recording it. She quickly scrolled thru the whole thing, beginning to end. Twice.

Satisfied, Liliy finally activated her ground bridge protocols and left the Nemesis.
Communication and Memories

Chapter Summary

The first half is Communication. The kids try to contact Liliy while she is with Orion. The second half is Memories. Optimus finally realizes something about the CRC.

After the Autobots returned from Unicron’s spark without Optimus, Miko happened to find Liliy’s cloak that she left on the chair.

“Hey, have you guys seen Liliy?” she asked the boys.

“Uh, the last time I saw her was before the Bots left,” replied Raf. “Why do you ask?”

“She left her cloak on the chair.” She held up the cloak. “She never does that.”

“Just call her phone,” said Jack. “She’s probably somewhere in the base.”

Miko pulled out her phone and called Liliy’s number. It went straight to voicemail.

“Her phone must be off.” Miko frowned down at her phone before she flipped it shut. She looked up at the boys. “Let’s go look for her in the back.”

The children searched the whole base. Liliy was nowhere to be found.

“She’s not here,” stated Jack as they gathered back in the main room.

“What if she followed the Bots when they went to stop Unicron?” asked Miko.

“That sounds more like something you would do, Miko.”

“And I might’ve if I hadn’t already seen what dark energon did to Raf.”

“But where would Liliy have gone if she didn’t go with the Bots?” asked Raf. “And if she did, why didn’t she come back with them?”

They were all silent as different ideas popped into their heads.

“Do you think we should tell the Bots about this?” Raf sounded worried.

“No,” said Jack. “Let’s wait a few days and see if she contacts us.”

Miko was concerned. She called Liliy everyday. It always went straight to voicemail so sometimes she would leave a message saying she missed her. She finally received a text from Liliy’s number after a week.

[Alive] was all it said.

Miko excitedly showed the boys later at school. They still hadn’t told the Bots that they thought
Liliy was missing yet.

“Ask her where she is?”

Miko texted back asking where she was.

[Can't say]

“Either she doesn’t know or she can’t tell us.”

“Ask when she is going to come back.”

Miko texted her again.

[IDK]

“She doesn’t know? Ask her if she is safe.”

[Mostly]

“Hey, ask her if she knows where Optimus is?”

No answer.

Miko texted again saying they missed her.

[Miss U2]

“Alright, so she can’t say where she is. She doesn’t know when she is coming back. And she is mostly safe.”

“But she didn’t reply when we asked about Optimus.”

“Maybe because she couldn’t.”

“Why not?”

Raf shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Over the next couple of weeks, the children would call and leave voicemails on Liliy’s phone. She would text them back with a one word reply or an emoji. They still hadn’t bothered to tell the Bots that she wasn’t there because none of them seemed to miss her. They were too focused on trying to find Optimus.

It was actually Agent Fowler who brought it to Ratchet’s attention when he showed up at the base looking for her.

“Ratchet, where’s Liliy?” he asked when he didn’t see her in the main room.

Miko answered before Ratchet could. “She’s not here.”

“What?!” Ratchet and Fowler demanded at the same time.

“What do you mean she isn’t here?” Fowler continued. “I told her that she had to stay here unless she had an escort. And I know she doesn’t have one because all the Bots are here!” He waved a
hand at the four Autobots in the room.

"Not all of them," countered Jack.

"Prime doesn’t count. He’s MIA."

"Wait," Ratchet interrupted. "You’re not saying that Lily is with Optimus right now, are you?"

The three children shrugged.

"We just know that the last time we saw her was before the Bots left for the planet core," said Jack.

"We’ve been leaving voice messages on her phone but she only replies to them with short texts," Raf said.

"Yeah. When we asked where she was, she just replied with ‘can’t say’," added Miko.

"Hm." Fowler rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Then we don’t know if it is actually her."

"Then I will text her right now and ask her to prove it." Miko pulled out her phone. "The doc and Fowler," she said aloud as she typed, "want to know if you are really Lily. Tell us something that only we would know." She hit send.

A message from Miko popped on Lily’s phone. She opened and read it.

Only something they would know? In one or two words? She tapped her phone on the console as she thought.

"Something wrong, Lily?" asked Orion.

"Huh? Oh, I was trying to remember..." She paused as she met his gaze. There was her answer. Something only Ratchet would know. "And I just thought of it. Thanks."

She waved off his quizzical glance as she picked up her phone to reply.

Miko’s phone buzzed. She checked it. "Oh. She texted back! Three words this time. That’s a first. But I don’t get it. All she said was ‘Hunter of Peace’."

"Let me see." Fowler took the phone. "Hunter of Peace. That means nothing to me. Ratchet?"

The medic’s expression was thoughtful. "Yes, it does." He looked up at them. "Lily told me that, from a human perspective, Orion Pax means ‘hunter of peace’. I believe that the person the children are communicating with is actually Lily."

"But does this mean that she is with Optimus?" asked Fowler.

"Not necessarily. She could be anywhere."

"When we asked if she knew where Optimus was, she never replied," shared Jack. "She never replies to anything we send her that is directly Cybertronian related."

"Her phone goes straight to voicemail when you try to call her. But she does check them because
she replies with texts. Maybe she is afraid of someone intercepting her cellphone signal,” Raf suggested.

“By the way, Agent Fowler. What did you need her for?” asked Jack.

“I was going to ask for her help on a special mission, but it looks like that’s out.” Fowler handed the phone back to Miko.

“Sorry,” said Miko.

The Autobots had taken Jack to hijack the Decepticon space bridge. The remaining humans were waiting to hear news after Liliy called. Finally the computer beeped at them.

“Base to Arcee,” Fowler spoke into the comm. “We're reading five Autobot life signals down there. Is Prime with you?”

{And Jack.} Arcee replied.

“Yes! Liliy got the big guy off the Con’s ship,” Miko cheered.

“But wait…” said June, looking around after the Bots and Jack returned to base with a restored Optimus. “Where’s Liliy?”

“Yeah,” added Raf. “When she called she said she was with Optimus on the Nemesis. What happened to her?”

“I’ll try calling her again,” offered Miko.

She put her phone on speaker after she dialed the number. It rang once and then played a message.

{Hey guys. I know you are looking for me but I just spent two months babysitting a confused archivist with memory problems and I am exhausted. So I went home to rest. I’ll contact you later. Stay safe. Liliy out.}

They all looked up at Optimus. He looked back them, slightly confused.

“That was an interesting yet somehow probably an accurate choice of words,” Ratchet said.

After a lengthy check-up, Ratchet told Optimus he needed to rest. The taller mech agreed and retreated to his quarters. With a heavy sigh, he sat on his berth and leaned back against the wall. He closed his optics and withdrew into his memory banks in hopes of finding something from the recent time he spent of the Nemesis. Despite his efforts, the last thing he could remember before coming to next to the active space bridge was releasing the matrix into Unicron’s spark. Sighing in defeat, he glanced around and noticed that the blank space from the last time he disappeared was now full of memories. Curious, he pulled them out to see what they were.

Flashback....
Optimus was in pain, on the edge of stasis. The noise of approaching pedes pierced the fog in his processor and he half opened his optics. A bot stood over him and the only thing that registered was the mask they wore. Not the fact that the silhouette, the bright color scheme, or even the color of their visor were all wrong for a Vehicon. Prime tried to rise but he couldn't. He didn't have the strength. The bot turned.

"Commander! Over here!"

Another bot appeared. This one's mask had the same mouthpiece but the orange visor was much wider. They knelt beside him.

"An Autobot…"

"What should we do, Commander? With those wounds, he won't last another day without help."
The commander did not respond right away.

"Call Kilo," they said finally.

"Yes, Commander." The bot opened a commlink. "Echo, have Kilo bridge to the commander's coordinates."

A few moments later, he heard a ground bridge open and another bot appeared. This one was far bigger than the others, bigger even than Optimus himself. And they too wore a vehicon mask.

"Be as careful as you can, Kilo," instructed the commander. To the comm, "Alfa. Redirect the bridge straight into the medbay."
The huge bot, carefully as they could, lifted Optimus into their arms. Pain flared and a weak cry escaped him.

"Hurry, Kilo." The commander turned to the first bot. "Hurry, you continue scouting. Try and find out what happened..."
The hum of the vortex drowned out the commander's last words. Optimus closed his optics against the brightness. The sounds were fading. The hum stopped and new voices spoke. Then the pain he felt when he was set down was too much and he fell into stasis.

He woke up sometime later. His pain was dull now but still there. He opened his optics and greeted by the sight of a high grey ceiling. He looked around and found he was lying in a large medical bay. He reached up to pull one of the tubes from his chassis but a three clawed servo stopped him. It was mech, painted red and yellow. A vehicon mask sat on top of his helm but his optics were blue and the symbol he wore was neither Autobot, nor Decepticon.

"You shouldn't move too much. We just finish closing your wounds," he said softly.

"Where am I?" the Prime asked, his voice still weak and full of static.

"The CRC medbay-"

"Ahh! Is he awake already?" interrupted a new voice. "I haven't finish replacing his armor."
The copter medic turned to the shorter, red and white mech who was approaching the med berth with a piece of freshly cast metal in his servos. He also had a vehicon mask atop his helm.
“Well, what took you so long, Foxtrot?” he asked, crossing his arms over his chassis and glaring at him.

“Oh, you know me, Oscar. Always the perfectionist.” Foxtrot smirked.

“Tch. Between you and Romeo, it’s like working with Knock Out all over again.” Oscar headed for a console. “I’m going to inform Echo that he is awake since the commander left base to check with the surveillance team.”

“Hey, at least I have better bedside manners and Romeo doesn’t overly obsess about his finish,” he called after the copter. To Optimus, "Move your arm a little, please. I need to weld this on."

Prime obeyed, moving his arm away from his side. Foxtrot’s servo transformed into a welder and his mask came down over his face as he carefully positioned the new armor.

“Finished!” he exclaimed when he was done, his servo returning. He pushed his mask back up and smiled down at Optimus. "All you need now is some more rest and you'll be as good as new. Well, almost. You still need to be repainted."

"Agreed. The commander will not be returning for several more hours," said Oscar from the console, while Foxtrot moved away from the med berth. "They will answer any more questions you have, so please rest until then."

Nodding, the Prime laid his helm back and closed his optics.

Optimus didn't realize he had fallen into recharge until he woke up again some more time later. He let out a low groan as he reached up to rub his faceplates.

"Oh, good. You're awake again," said Foxtrot, coming over to him. "The commander-" He looked around the medbay. "...was just here."

"Leecher left already but I am still here," a female voice answered from the counter behind Optimus.

"Oh, there you are, Madam. I didn't see you before."

"Of course. I'm so easy to miss." The reply was sarcastic. "Go find something else to do before you talk yourself into an aft-kicking, Fox," she ordered.

"Yes, ma'am." He smirked as he walked off.

"So..." the voice was closer this time and Prime looked over in surprise. Standing on the little arm that stuck out from the side of the med berth was a femme that stood barely seven feet tall. Her colors were platinum, gray, and red. A reflective visor hid her optics and her left arm was completely gone.

His optics widened even farther as he finally recognized the symbol that he had seen on the medic.

"You are a Laserblade."

The corner of her mouth turned upward in a half-smile. "Finally someone old enough to recognize my clan. But, you were not yet a Prime when we were wiped out, according the historical records."

"No. But I was an archivist at Iacon."
"That would explain your knowledge."

"Are the others…?" His optics glanced in the direction that Foxtrot had went.

"No. I am the last. They are all troopers I stole from the Decepticons and gave new purpose to. Except Leecher. They helped me escape Cybertron. This symbol," she brushed her digits over the red blade embossed on her chassis, "now represents my new family. The Cybertronian Rebel Corps. CRC for short. I should also mention that the only reason I decided to save your aft was to piss off Megatron. We are not your friends." She crossed her arm over her chassis and looked away from his steady gaze.

"I… understand," he said, looking away as well.

"However..." she started causing him to look at her again. She pushed her visor up, revealing her red optics. "…my trust and respect can always be earned if a bot is deserving of it."

Optimus’ optics shot open as he sat up straight on the berth. Now he understood why the CRC seemed so familiar to him. The blank in his memory had been the time he spent two weeks recovering at their base after his last big fight with Megatron before the warlord disappeared for three years. He had met 25 of the 26 former Decepticon troopers who now followed the orders of a one-armed Laserblade, known as the Madam, and her loyal second-in-command, Leecher. They had even allowed him to tour a portion of their base. The last thing he remembered about his time there was lying on a med berth and the Madam apologizing to him before there was a sharp pain at the back of his helm and everything went black. The next memory was him onlining in Ratchet’s medbay with no memory of the time he was gone.

Determined to find out why his memories had been blocked, Optimus got up from his berth and returned to the main room. Ratchet was at his workbench in the medbay when Prime entered.

“Optimus,” the medic said, looking up from his work, “you’re supposed to be resting.”

“I remembered something.”

“From the Nemesis?” He followed the taller mech over to the main computer console.

“No,” Optimus replied, calling up the commlink. “Something from before.”

“Wha-”

“Autobot Outpost Omega One to CRC base. Do you read?”

Static was the only answer.

“Optimus Prime to Echo. Come in.”

{Well, that was unexpected,} replied a smooth voice from the comm. {One moment, Optimus, and I’ll patch you to the Commander.}

There was more static.

“Optimus, what is going on?” asked a concerned and confused Ratchet.

“I’ll explain later, old friend.”
The center monitor winked and a box appeared with live video feed of an expressionless, matte black mech.

{Optimus, nice to see you again. What can we do for you?}

Prime always found it odd that Leecher referred to their self in the plural, but he never asked about it. “Is the Madam available?”

{We’re afraid not.}

“Then perhaps you can tell me why my memories were erased.”

{Not erased. Just blocked. If we had truly erased them, they would still be gone.}

“But why?”

{At the time, we were not ready to reveal ourselves, but we could not leave you in the condition you were in. So we did what needed to be done to preserve our secret.}

“So why now? After all this time…?”

{We’ll leave that to the Madam to explain when she becomes available… which might not be for a day or two.}

“Very well. Have her contact me when she does.”

{Of course. Leecher out.} The video went away.

“Optimus…?”

Prime looked at his medic.

“Remember that time a few years ago when I went missing from two weeks and when you found me again, I could not remember where I had been?”

“Yes…” Realization dawned on him. “Wait. You were with the CRC?”

“According to my reloaded memories--and Leecher-- yes.”

Leech crawled over the soft, cotton fabric looking for Liliy. She liked to sleep basically buried under a mountain of multi-colored pillows and blankets. And she slept in her alt so that none of the fabric could get caught or rip on her frame. The bed itself was fairly large too. It could easily fit three or four Liliy-sized frames.

Leech finally found her curled around a body pillow and half hidden under a fleece blanket. Even though her hair was holographic, she still had terrible bedhead and it always amused the cyberleech. They tried to smooth her hair with a tail as they whispered to her.

“Liliy. Time to wake up.”

“Mmmm.” She curled tighter around the body pillow.

“Come on, Liliy. You have done nothing but refuel and recharge since you got back. The 'boys'
want to see you.”

She squirmed backwards until she was completely buried under a pile of pillows.

Leech tried something else. “Optimus called. He remembers us and wanted to know why we blocked his memories.”

Her head emerged from the pile and she blinked sleepily at him. “What did you tell him?”

“That we did it to preserve our secret. He also wanted to know why we were suddenly helping them again… I told him that I’d leave it to you to explain.”

“Gee thanks.” She dropped her head onto the nearest pillow.

“Well, now that you’re awake. Please get up.”

“Fine, fine.” She crawled out of the bedding and got off the bed. “But only for my 'boys'.” She transformed and allowed Leech to attach to her shoulder before heading for her washracks.
“Hm, it’s rare to see someone this far out of town, isn’t it?” asked Ratchet.

He and Raf were headed back to the base after he picked the boy up from school. They were well outside of Jasper at this point.

Raf sat up straight in Ratchet’s front seat and looked out the windshield as they approached the figure walking on the side of the road.

“Yeah. But, wait...” He adjusted his glasses. “Isn’t that Liliy?”

The person stopped and looked back at them. It was indeed Liliy. Ratchet slowed down and pulled to a stop off the road just past her. She went up to the passenger window. The medic rolled it down for her.

“Hey guys, what’s up?” she asked nonchalantly as if this was the most normal thing in the world.

“I could ask you the same question,” returned Ratchet. “What are you doing out here, Liliy?”

“Well, I hitched a ride into Jasper and I didn’t know if anyone was in town so I figured I’d just walk to the base.”

“You should have called. Someone could have come to get you.”

“That would just ruin the surprise.”

“Consider us surprised. Now get in so we can go.” Ratchet opened his driver door.

Liliy walked around the front. At the door, she put her foot up on the running board and hesitated, staring at the seat.

“Something wrong with my seat?” Ratchet asked.

“Liliy, it is going to be ok,” Raf said. “We are well out of town so the trip will be short. The sooner you get in, the sooner it will be over and you can get out.”

Liliy listened to him, the corners of her mouth turning up just slightly in a small smile.

“Thank you, Rafael, for understanding.”

She stepped up into Ratchet’s interior and sat in the driver seat. The door shut and Ratchet pulled back onto the road.

“Well, I don’t understand,” groused Ratchet. “Mind explaining it to me?”

Instead of replying, Liliy seemed to space out, staring straight ahead at nothing, her hand gripping the seat belt across her chest.

“Do you mind speeding up a little, Ratchet? Liliy really hates riding inside Cybertronians.” Raf explained for her. “I did some research and I believe she has some type of an anxiety disorder. Remember awhile back when she got a ride into town from Bee and when we got back to base, she said she just got a little car sick. It was because of her disorder. She probably knows that there is really nothing to be worried about but at the same time it freaks her out. Do Cybertronians suffer
“from stuff like anxiety?”

“Well-” Ratchet started.

“Bumblebee,” Liliy interrupted. “Bumblebee suffers from PTSD. Sometimes, during his recharges, he has nightmares. Arcee and Bulkhead too but they don’t have them as often as Bee. I don’t know about you and Optimus. I never go near your rooms.”

Ratchet remained silent for several minutes.

“Yes, Rafael,” he said finally. “We too feel fear and anxiety, as much as we hate to admit it.”

“No, Rafael,” Liliy corrected. “Just because we aren’t made of the same stuff doesn’t mean we are not alike,” said Liliy, but it was unclear who she was actually addressing.

Romeo, Hirry, and Zulu were tasked with retrieving one of the two remaining Iacon relics that Orion had managed to decode. They bridged to a place up the road from the coordinates because they noticed that two Decepticon signals were already at the location.

Just before they got to the site, Bumblebee and Bulkhead appeared out of their own bridge. The three transformed and took to the trees for cover. Bulkhead and Bumblebee were arguing about something. Then Knock Out came racing out of the nearby cave. Bulkhead was going to go after him but then Breakdown came rushing out of the cave, his hammer ready. Bulkhead told Bumblebee to go after the sportscar Con instead. Bumblebee did, but on foot. The three watchers shared a confused look. Then Romeo took charge.

“Zulu, you stay and help Bulkhead. Hirry and I will go after the speedsters.”

Romeo and Hirry transformed back to their vehicle modes and took off down the road. Bumblebee continued to chase Knock Out on foot until the sportscar Con sped up. Bumblebee grabbed a rusty old truck that happened to be on the side of the road and hopped on the back of it, riding it down the slope.

Knock Out drifted thru a sharp curve ahead. Bumblebee, on the other hand, was not going to make it. He was headed straight for the cliff. Romeo sped past him to go after Knock Out. Hirry transformed right behind Bumblebee and grabbed his servo as he went over. The scout smacked the cliffside face first.

“Gotcha!” Hirry exclaimed.

“Uh, thanks,” Bumblebee beeped, looking up at her.

Hirry pulled him up. Bulkhead and Zulu showed up as Bumblebee scrambled to his pedes.

“Bee, are you ok?” the wrecker asked.

“I’m fine.”

“So, Bumblebee, what was with that?” asked Hirry. “Why didn’t you transform? Something wrong with your t-cog?”

“It’s missing.”

Hirry looked at Zulu and then flipped down her mask to run a scan. “Oh.”
“I can’t believe you ruined my finish again!” Knock Out’s protest floated to them.

Romeo came trudging back up the road carrying the relic in one servo while the other one was changed into a blaster and pointed at the back of the Con walking in front of him in stasis cuffs. Both of their red paint jobs were covered in scratches. There was also a blaster mark on Knock Out’s door. No doubt Romeo’s revenge for Tango.

Knock Out continued to rant. “When I get my servos on you, you’ll-”

“Shut your trap, tin head,” Hirry ordered, stepping toward him.

The Con stopped in surprise. “A femme?”

Her optics narrowed. “Yeah. What of it?”

“Uh… It’s just… I thought the only femmes on the planet were Spider-legs and the two-wheeler.”

“There are femmes among the Vehicons on the Nemesis.”

“Tsh. They don’t count. They’re just-”

Hirry decked him before he could finish and he crashed to the ground, out cold.

“Nice one, Hirry,” Romeo said. “But couldn’t you have waited until we were back up at the cave to do that? Now we have to carry him.”

Hirry just rolled her optics. Reaching down, she grabbed one of Knock Out’s ankles and started dragging his body back up the road.

Bulkhead and Bumblebee shared a confused glance before looking at Romeo for an explanation.

Romeo shrugged. “Can’t just leave the good doctor laying out in the open, ya know. Not in his root mode. Even we believe in being robots in disguise. By the way, Bee, who took your t-cog?”

“MECH,” beeped Bumblebee, clutching his fists.

Romeo frowned. “The Madam isn’t going to be happy when she finds out.”

“Indeed,” agreed Zulu.

Bulkhead was about to ask what they meant when his comm went off.

{Bulkhead, where are you? Is Bumblebee with you?}

Bulkhead sighed. “Yes, he is, Ratchet.”

{I’m sending you a ground bridge. Return to base immediately.}

“Yes, Ratchet.”

A ground bridge opened nearby. The two Autobots disappeared into it.

“I guess they forgot about this.” Romeo held up the relic. He looked up the road. “We better go help Hirry.”
Alfa was sitting up reading while Echo recharged on their shared berth. He looked up from his datapad when he heard Echo muttering. The sleeping mech’s servos twitched. Figuring it was just a bad dream, Alfa sent relaxing vibes across their bond. Echo settled down. But only for a moment. Alfa frowned. Usually that worked. He reached across the bond. Echo did not answer but Alfa felt his distress and fear. Something was wrong. He set down the datapad and moved to the berth.

“Echo, wake up.” He gently shook his partner’s shoulder. As he saw that he was coming online, he asked, “What’s wrong?”

Alfa flinched as Echo’s claws suddenly dug into his arm, but he could not look away from his partner’s wide optics.

“Where are the twins?!” Echo gasped, his voice laced with static.

Oh. Oh, no. The twins were out on a mission for the Madam. If Echo was acting this way, something must’ve gone wrong.

“I don’t know, Echo. But we can find out. Come on.”

He pulled Echo up off the berth. Servo in servo, they ran down the hallway to the main hall. They were almost the Comm center when an alarm sounded. It was the alarm that only went off if a member was critically injured. Echo looked up at Alfa as a second alarm went off. Alfa squeezed his servo and headed for the receiving room. The medics were right behind them. Victor already had the coordinates set and was activating the ground bridge.

“Echo, wait!” Alfa called as Echo let go of his servo and ran ahead into the portal.

The first thing they noticed was all the energon. It was everywhere. And there was a lot of it. Too much! The second thing Alfa noticed was the other ground bridge across the way. And the battered form of Megatron disappearing into it while dragging a big, golden hammer.

The second thing Echo noticed were the twins. Golf lay face down on the ground. More than half of one wing was missing while the other was so twisted it was painful just to look at. And there was a big scorch mark in the middle of his back. Indy sat against some boulders, his servo clutching his side while energon pooled underneath him. His helm hung down with his chin against his chestplates.

Alfa had to hold Echo back to let the medics do their job. Foxtrot went to Indy while Oscar rushed to Golf. Delta and Seaser assisted them. While they worked to stop the bleeds on the twins, Leecher prepped the medbay and sent Bravo and Charlie thru the portal with stretchers.

“Victor, redirect the bridge straight into the medbay,” Alfa ordered thru the comm as the twins were being carefully loaded up for transport.

As soon as they were all back at base, Alfa led Echo out into the hall to get him out of the medics’ way.

“Alfa, Echo.”

They looked down to see Liliy coming toward them. She was in her root mode.

“Alfa, Optimus is here. Please make sure he is returned to his base soon. Echo…” The look he gave her filled her with guilt. “I need you to find MECH. Even if you don’t work on finding them yourself, please insure that my orders get to the Comm center.”
“Yes, ma’am,” he replied, his voice tight.

Liliy nodded and disappeared into the medbay.

Optimus and Arcee had already come back from scouting when Ratchet arrived at the base with Raf and Liliy.

“Look who we found on the side of the road,” commented Raf as he jumped out of Ratchet’s alt.

“Uh, thanks for the ride, Ratchet,” Liliy said after she climbed out.

Optimus froze at the sound of her voice. It was strikingly familiar.

“I’m sorry, Optimus.” The last words of the Madam of the CRC echoed through his processor.

Prime turned to look at Liliy. She looked back at him with a questioning gaze.

“Something wrong, O.P.?” she asked.

He saw it now. All of the similarities. Her red and silvery white hair, her gray clothes with hints of red. Her missing arm! Even her eyes had a red tint to them. It made more sense now too. The reason why the CRC was suddenly so interested in helping them. A bunch of questions filled his processor, but there was a more pressing matter at hand.

“Liliy, can I talk to you? Privately?”

Liliy saw the change in the Prime’s gaze. Now that he had his memories back, he could see through her human guise and he recognized her. And he was, no doubt, burning with questions, things he wanted answered before he exposed her to his team.

“Sure, Optimus.”

Optimus knelt and offered his servo. Liliy looked slightly surprised by the gesture but didn’t hesitate to sit on his waiting palm. It was something he learned to do as Orion when they were on the Nemesis. He probably did not even realize what he was doing. Lifting her carefully, he disappeared down the hall. They entered his quarters. He set her on his berth and then sat down beside her.

“I have several questions I want to ask you,” Optimus said, “but there is a more pressing matter. It involves Bumblebee.”

“What is it?”

“Do you have a spare t-cog?”


“Bumblebee was attacked by MECH and they took his t-cog.”

“I see.” Liliy was surprisingly calm. “Yes. We have some spare t-cogs.”

Suddenly, a noise like a siren went off. Liliy snatched her phone of her pocket and looked at the message.
“Optimus,” she said, her voice urgent, “I need to return home immediately. There is an emergency and I’m needed in the medbay.” Liliy’s visor fell over her eyes and a bridge opened on the other side of the room. “If you come with me, you can get a t-cog for Bee.”

Optimus nodded and stood up. Liliy was on his shoulder in an instant. Optimus went thru the bridge. On the other side they met Victor.

“Keep the portal ready. Optimus needs to go back,” Liliy told him as they passed.

In the main hall they met the grounder half of the surveillance team. X-ray was there too.

“X-ray, please go to the storage and get a spare t-cog for Optimus,” Liliy ordered before she took off down the hall leading to the medbay.

“Is it for Bumblebee?” asked Romeo as X-ray nodded and ran off too.

“You know about it?” Optimus replied.

“Yeah. We just left Bee and Bulkhead. Hirry here had to save your scout from falling off a cliff. Also, we got the relic from the Cons.” He held up the shield generator.

“You can hold onto it. By the way, what is the emergency, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Golf and Indy were sent to get the other relic.”

“There was a third one?”

“Apparently, you, as Orion decoded three sets of Iacon coordinates. The spark extractor, this, and the one the twins went after.”

“Do you know what it was?”

“The forge of Solus Prime.”

Optimus’ optics went wide.

“They were almost done excavating it when Megatron showed up. They’re both alive but it was pretty bad.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. And I cannot help but feel somewhat responsible.”

“You are in no way responsible, Optimus Prime.”

Optimus turned to look up at Alfa who had just entered the main hall. The stealth plane was several feet taller than him. His stoic expression was grimmer than usual.

“We know risks,” Alfa continued. “And the twins did not go down without a fight. I saw Megatron. And I saw the battleground. He was leaking just as bad as they were.”

“According to our intel,” Lima suddenly interrupted, coming out of the Comm center, “while the twins may have gotten the short end of the stick, Megatron returned to the Nemesis in worse condition than when he left.”

“How worse?” asked Optimus.

“Whiskey heard from Ucon,” Lima said, “that Soundwave sent him straight to the medbay and he
left quite a trail of dark energon in his wake.”

“But I was the one who decoded—” Optimus said.

“You were suffering from memory loss and did not know better,” countered Hirry before he could finish. “Also, if the Madam hears you talking like that she will kick your aft back to Cybertron.”

“Lil? But she’s—”

“The Madam has put all of us on our afts more than once.” X-ray rejoined them. “Kilo and Alfa included. And the bigger you are, the harder you fall, so I’d be careful if I were you. Here’s your t-cog, by the way.” He handed Optimus the biomech.

“Thank you.”

“Lima.” Echo stood at the entrance to the hall to the medbay behind Alfa.

“Yes, Echo?” The lime green femme gave him her full attention.

“The Madam has issued orders to find MECH.”

“One bunch of annoying squishes coming right up.” Lima hurried back to the Comm center while Echo disappeared back down the hallway.

“If you find MECH, will you let us know?” Optimus requested.

“That's up to the Madam,” Alfa replied.

“I should get back then.”

“I’ll show you out.”

After Alfa bridged Optimus back to his quarters, there was a knock on the door. It was Ratchet.

“Sorry to bother you, Optimus.”

“It is alright. Lil? just left.”

“She did? I didn’t see her in the hall.”

“What is it you need, old friend?”

The medic did not notice that Prime was holding the t-cog.

“Bulkhead and Bumblebee are back. Apparently they went after a relic signal and encountered Knock Out and Breakdown. Bumblebee chased Knock Out and almost fell off a cliff but he was saved by the CRC surveillance team.” He paused to glare at the floor. When he looked again, his expression was troubled. “Optimus, I was thinking. There is a way to make Bumblebee whole again... A transplant.”

Optimus frowned. “But that would require a donor.”

“Yes. And you need look no further than the Autobot standing before you.” Ratchet put a servo over his chestplates.
“A generous offer, old friend. But your solution would merely trade one Autobot’s handicap for another’s. I-”

“Optimus, listen,” Ratchet interrupted. "I don’t rely on my t-cog. Not like Bumblebee does. The ability to transform is virtually wasted on me. This is where I spend my days. Where my thoughts and hands are of value, not my weapons or wheels. Our team can’t afford to be down one warrior in the field.”

“You make a compelling case, Ratchet, but I was going to say that I already found a replacement t-cog for Bumblebee.” He held up the t-cog in his servo.

Ratchet just stared. “Where did you get that?”

“From the CRC.”

“What?!”

“Bumblebee needs a t-cog. So I asked if they had any spares.”

“But how did you get it?”

“It… was bridged here.”

“Bridged? Optimus-”

“Ratchet, we can discuss that later. Right now, there is work to be done. The sooner Bumblebee is made whole again, the better.”

“But it came from them! ? I-”

“You said it yourself, did you not? Our team can’t afford to be down a warrior in the field.”

“Yes, but-”

“Ratchet, you know that I would prefer not to have to issue orders to you concerning medical matters.”

Ratchet froze, surprised. Optimus hardly ever used that tone of voice with him. He looked down at the t-cog and then back at the mech holding it. “Do you trust them?”

“Yes. I do.”

Ratchet sighed and took the t-cog from his servo. “Very well, Optimus.”

Exhausted, Lily exited of the medbay. She looked up to find Echo still standing outside the door where she had left him. She got up on his shoulder and laid her helm against his.

“ Seems like it was just yesterday that we were here wishing that a day like this would never come.” She sat up straight. “Echo, I’m sorry. This is my fault-”

Echo suddenly reached up and grabbed her off his shoulder. He didn’t squeeze her but he wasn’t exactly gentle as he turned her to face him. She looked at him, startled. There was so much pain in his optics.
“Madam, please. Even if you say it… It is not your fault. You did not know what was going to happen…” Closing his optics, he buried his face in her small chassis. “It’s not your fault,” he whispered.

Liliy hugged his helm. She could feel him trembling. Not for the first time, Liliy wished her real frame was bigger so that she could do more to comfort him. They stayed like that for a few minutes until Echo calmed down.

“Are they going to be alright?” he asked finally as he pulled her back.

“Well, they’re alive. And they’re stable… for now… But it is going to be a long road to recovery for them, you understand? They are going to need you.”

He nodded. “May… may I see them?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“I’ll go with you.”

They looked up to see Alfa coming toward them. Echo carefully bent over and set Liliy on her pedes. Her servo lingered on his for a moment as she smiled up at him. He managed a tiny smile in return before he straighten.

Liliy watched them disappeared into the medbay before she turned and headed for the main hall. She was exhausted after working for several hours to help stabilize the twins and she wanted nothing more than to go to bed, but she felt bad for running out on Optimus. So, instead of heading to her room, she made her way to the Comm center.

When she entered, Liliy found Lima and Mike hard at work, scanning radio chatter and government databases from various countries, looking for MECH. Nova was there too, trying to help anyway he could, but mostly he was there to be near his brother.

Lima nodded to her when she climbed up on the console.

“Any luck?” she asked.

“Not really. We’ve found bits and pieces, but nothing definite yet,” Lima replied. "I heard that the twins are stable. But how is Echo?”

“Shaken. But I think he is going to be ok. He and Alfa are with the twins now.”

“It was really weird seeing Echo like that,” Mike commented. “Just standing in the hall, staring at nothing.”

“It’s because of the bond he shares with the twins,” Liliy said. “He could feel their pain and he was scared for their lives.”

“We should understand that.” Mike glanced at over at Nova who nodded.

“Nova, do you think you could find Optimus Prime’s location for me?” asked Liliy.

“Uh…” The bronze mech turned to the terminal nearest him and typed in the request. “He’s out on patrol, it looks like. In the Nevada desert near their base.”

“Very good. Then I’ll need a ground bridge.”
“But, Madam, you’re-”

“I need to talk to him, Nova. Before I recharge.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He followed her to the receiving room.

“Are you leaving already, Madam?” asked Victor, when they entered.

“Just for a little while. Optimus and I need to discuss some things before I go back to Omega One. And I need to check on the twins again.”

“And recharge at some point,” Nova reminded her as he put in the coordinates and activated the bridge.

“Yes. And recharge,” Liliy agreed before she disappeared into the bridge.

Optimus slammed on his brakes and transformed when a ground bridge opened on the road ahead of him. He blinked when Liliy appeared, her hololayer flickering on to hide her metal frame. She flashed him a tired smile as the portal vanished.

“We probably should not stand in the road. Someone might come along and see us.”

“Yeah.”

Optimus transformed back to his alt mode and opened his driver door in a silent invitation. Liliy hesitated but she was honestly too tired to care and his seat looked comfortable. She slowly climbed into the cab. The door closed as she buckled in.

“Sorry for running out on you earlier,” she said as he started driving. Despite her exhaustion, her hand still tighten around the seatbelt. But it was Optimus’ voice that kept her focused.

“Do not apologize,” he said. “I understand that it was an emergency. I trust that the twins are going to make it?”

“They are stable for the moment.”

“That is good news.” Optimus was silent for a moment. “I can’t help but feel that I am partially at fault for what happened.”

“You and me both,” she responded, much to his surprise. “But Echo told me not to blame myself.”

“Alfa told me the same.”

“What about Bumblebee? Did the t-cog work?”

“Ratchet was reluctant to do the surgery at first after he found out where the spare came from but I was able to convince him that it was a better option than him using his own t-cog.”

“Oh Primus.” Liliy facepalmed. “He really is an idiot, isn’t he? What does he have against the CRC?”

“I do not know. You will have to ask him that yourself. But, yes. Bumblebee’s transplant was a success.”
“That’s good to hear.”

They lapsed into a long silence.

“You have questions for me, don’t you?” Liliy asked finally, mostly to keep herself awake.

“Yes. Though, some of them were answered when I realized that you were the Madam.”

“Such as?”

“Why the CRC was suddenly helping us.”

“Ah, yes. I may have been behind some of those missions.” Liliy got the distinct impression in the moment of silence that followed her statement that if Prime had been in his root mode he would’ve rolled his optics at her. “What else do you want to know?”

“I thought I had gained your trust. And yet you blocked my memories of you. Why?”

“You did. What I didn’t trust was the random, off chance that you might captured by the Decepticons and they used a cortical psychic patch on you... Or you can just say I was paranoid.”

“What changed your mind?”

“You protected me, even though I was just a random stranger on the highway.”

“I thought you were a human and I did not want you to be a casualty of our war. I honestly did not wish for you to get involved. You could have revealed yourself or left at any time and yet you stayed. Why?”

“I thought about leaving many times but the longer I was there, the fonder I became of all of you.”

Liliy smiled. “Especially the children. Besides it was so much easier to keep tabs on you when I was in the loop.”

“May I ask another question?”

“Of course.”

“What happen on the Nemesis?”

“You don’t remember?” she asked carefully.

“No. But I was informed that you were there with me.”

Liliy did her best to not let her relief show as she replied. “Maybe I’ll tell you someday but I’m afraid I need to return home now.”

“You aren’t coming back to our base?” he asked as he pulled to a stop on the side of the road.

“Not yet. I need to check on the twins again.”

“I understand.” Optimus opened his door so she could climb out. He transformed as she called up a bridge home. “Liliy.”

She looked up at him.

“Please let me know when you find MECH.”
“Sure,” she said before she disappeared but he was not convinced at all by her answer.
{Madam! We finally found MECH!} Liliy heard Mike nearly shout over the base wide intercom. She hurried over to the Comm center and climbed up on console.

"They're here." Lima indicated to the map on the monitor. "It's a secluded, old warehouse in the middle of the woods. I've really sent Whiskey there to keep an optic on them."

"Wait. Is Starscream there too?" Liliy asked.

A gray Decepticon symbol blinked on the map where Lima had pointed.

"Apparently he has aligned himself with MECH," Lima informed her. "He must've told them about energon because they were unloading cubes of it when Whiskey arrived."

"Well great. First, they steal Bee's t-cog. Now they have energon. There is only one thing they could be doing. They are trying to build a copy of us."

"Are we going to stop them?" asked Mike.

"You bet we are!" Liliy answered. "That is Bumblebee's t-cog they're using. Even if we already gave him a replacement, we're going to get back his original. Besides, we can't leave our technology in the hands of a human like that. I need a couple of volunteers to-"

"I'll go."

They looked over to see Echo in the doorway. His mask was already down so his expression was unreadable but, if the expression of Alfa who stood close behind him was anything to go by, Echo was not in a good mood.

"Very well," said Liliy, knowing better than to argue with him. "Alfa and Echo will accompany me. But there is one more person we need to get."

"Madam?"

"The victim himself."

Bumblebee was on his way back to the base after dropping Raf off at home when he received a comm from Liliy.

{Bee, I need your help. I'm gonna send you a ground bridge.}

"Sure thing, Liliy."

A bridge opened before him and he entered it thinking it would lead back to base. Instead, on the other side he found Liliy in some dark woods. He transformed as the bridge closed and looked around.

"Liliy, where are we?" he asked, focusing on her.

"I figured you might like to help get you t-cog back."
"By ourselves? Optimus wouldn't like that."

"Don't worry, Bee. I brought backup." She gestured to the trees around them.

Three flyers materialized out of the shadows, their masks down. Bumblebee took a step back, watching them warily. They were all bigger than him and the menacing vibe they gave off made him uneasy.

"Bee, I'd like you to meet Alfa, Echo, and Whiskey of the CRC." Liliy's voice seemed to ease the tension a little.

Alfa and Echo, whose dark frames blended eerily with the shadows, simply nodded.

"Are we doing this or not?" Whiskey asked, the gold bits of his paint standing out more than the brown. Bumblebee wondered how he had missed him before.

"Are you ok with helping?" Liliy asked Bumblebee.

He looked down at her again and slammed his fist into his palm. "Bring it on."

With a wave of Liliy's hand, the three fliers melted back into the shadows. Bumblebee's optics went wide as he watched Whiskey literally disappear into thin air.

"By the way, Bee. Starscream will be there," she said as she led the way toward the warehouse. "Apparently, he has allied himself with MECH."

"He's an idiot." Bumblebee was quick to follow her but he kept an optic on the shadows, trying to spot the fliers again. "I wouldn't even go near MECH after what happened to Breakdown."

"Yes, well. He was desperate for energon and MECH had the means of finding it for him."

There were no lights outside the giant warehouse. Alfa went to one side of the doors and Echo and Whiskey to the other. Liliy led Bumblebee right up the middle. On her signal, the three fliers rolled the doors back.

"Evening, gentlemen," Liliy purred as MECH and Starscream turned to look at them. "I do believe you took something that belongs to my friend here and we would very much like it back."

"Really, Bumblebee," Starscream chided. "Bringing a human here while you are without a t-cog and so unarmed."

Bumblebee lifted an arm and activated his blaster. "Oh yeah?"

"What?! How?" the seeker shrieked.

The three fliers stepped up to flank Bumblebee with their blasters ready. MECH aimed their weapons at the group.

"When MECH gets involved with a Cybertronian, we will inevitably show up to ruin their plans," said Liliy.

"Where's the other one? The black one with wheels?" asked Silas.

"Otherwise occupied, but I will let them know you asked about them."
"You seem to be well acquainted with these robots."

Liliy smirked. "Oh, just a little…" She lifted her hand and snapped her fingers. "Boys."

The three fliers opened fire. Starscream was the first to go down, hit by an electro-charge from Whiskey. A few of the humans were charcoal before the rest of them scattered for cover.

As soon as they started shooting, Bumblebee sprinted across the space and leapt onto the unfinished prototype that was standing against the far wall. He ripped open the chassis and pulled out the t-cog. He jumped down and flinched when he heard a disturbing crunch. He looked down. His ped had crushed the legs of one of the burnt corpses. He quickly stepped back, not noticing that the shooting had stopped because MECH had evacuated.

"Bumblebee?" Liliy asked.

He looked up at her, horrified.

"If you have the t-cog, then let's go." She waved for him to 'come on'.

"But, Liliy…” He glanced at the mechs behind her and then looked back at the burnt corpse.

Liliy followed his gaze. "What about it?"

"They killed a human!" He looked at her again, disbelieving. How was she so calm?

She shrugged. "It's not the first time. And it probably won't be the last. Or were you not paying attention that time you went to make sure the CRC saved Breakdown?"

Bumblebee stiffened. "It was dark. I saw some burning cars but I was too focused on Breakdown…"

"Figures... Come on, Bee. There is something I need to tell you."

Liliy turned and nodded to the three fliers. They nodded back and Whiskey vanished while the other two turned to a ground bridge that opened nearby. She looked back at Bumblebee.

"Coming?"

She headed off across the big open yard in front of the warehouse. Bumblebee hesitated, glancing down at the corpse one more time before he followed. She kept walking until she reached the trees. Looking back to make sure he was following, she kept going.

Bumblebee followed her for a long time. Somehow, despite their size difference, Liliy managed to stay ahead of him. She finally stopped at the edge of a small clearing. Sitting on a fallen log, she motioned for him to sit too. He did, on the ground across from her. He was still holding the t-cog, he realized, and sat it on the ground next to him.

"I'm going to assume that Optimus hasn't told you yet."

He looked at her quizzically, tilting his helm with a questioning whir.

"That I'm not human."

Overall, Liliy thought that Bumblebee took it pretty well. He thought she was joking at first, but
then she transformed. He did freak out a little bit then, babbling something a pretender. She had to
look that one up. Once she understood what he meant, she explained that, no, she wasn't a
pretender. They use a special armor to take on the shape of whoever they're pretending to be. Her
alt mode is a human. She can't transform into anything else. Especially since, when she arrived on
Earth, there was nothing else technology-wise she could scan. She finally got around to telling him
that she was the Head of the CRC. He got really quiet after that.

"So you let them kill humans?"
Liliy sighed. He wasn't going to let that go, was he? "I have killed humans too. But it is not like we
go around killing humans for the heck of it. No. The humans we have killed threatened our
existence on this planet. We killed to protect ourselves."

"That doesn't make it right."
"You sound like Optimus."
"I'll take that as a compliment."
"Take it however you like," Liliy growled. She transformed back to her alt mode and ran her hand
thru her hair. A human habit she did sometimes when she was stressed. "Speaking of Optimus,"
she said, somewhat calmer. "We should probably get you back."

"Ah… Yeah… I was just supposed to drop Raf at home and go straight back to base."
"Lovely. Ratchet's gonna have a fit."
"Optimus probably isn't going to be happy about this either."
"No. He's not. Well…" She pulled her phone out. "That's get this over with."

Liliy requested a bridge back to the Autobot base from Victor. Bumblebee was surprised when
they walked thru and came out inside the base's entrance tunnel. He looked down at her with
furrowed optic ridges. She just shrugged innocently and headed for the main room.

"-access to satellite imagery that I believe pinpoints the center of operations of MECH," Agent
Fowler was saying as they entered.

"This is good news. We can go get Bee's t-cog back."
"Actually…" Liliy waited till she had their attention before she continued. "We've already been
there and done that." She pointed up at the t-cog in Bumblebee's servo.

"WHAT!?" Ratchet's angry outburst made them both flinch.

"Liliy…" Optimus was clearly disappointed. "You were supposed to inform me when you found
MECH."

"Then consider yourself informed." She put her hand on her hip.

"Before you went off and endangered one of my mechs."

"He was hardly in any danger. I made sure to bring backup."

"That killed a human!" the scout suddenly beeped.
"Really, Bumblebee?" Liliy asked, looking up at him. "You're still on that?"

"The Autobots don't condone the killing of humans."

Liliy turned to face him fully. "Do my boys look like Autobots to you?" she snapped. "And while you were crying over that corpse you stepped on, you failed to notice the other five lumps of burnt flesh lying around. Yes, we kill humans. The ones we are at war with." She saw Optimus open his mouth to object but she waved him off. "Don't try and contradict me on that because we are at war with MECH. They started it the moment they kidnapped Breakdown and dissected him. And we have been trying to do our best to keep you out of their hands and foil their plans. Like when they teamed up with Airachnid to get Arcee. And getting your t-cog back tonight. We set-" She suddenly stopped talking as a realization hit her. "Oh, frag..."

"What?"

"We left Starscream there."

"So?"

"Bumblebee, we got your t-cog back but we left Starscream there. Unconscious and fragging defenseless!"

"Oh..."

She was running her hand thru her hair again. "Damnit. Echo would have been the one to point that out before we even got out of there, but he's not himself since the twins..." Her voice trailed off. She started up again. "It doesn't matter as long as Starscream survives, which is highly likely since MECH will be needing to relocate and they don't currently have the means to move him. We'll just have to wait for MECH to rear their ugly head again and squash them like usual."

Up until now, the other Bots and Agent Fowler were silent, trying to process what was going on.

"Ok. Hold up. What is going on here?" Agent Fowler asked finally.

Liliy looked up at Optimus. "You still haven't told them yet?"

"I was waiting for you."

"Told us what?" asked Bulkhead.

"Why the Cybertronian Rebel Corps has been so interested in helping you all the sudden."

Ratchet narrowed his optics at her. "And why is that?"

"Because of me."

Ratchet started. "You?!!" Then he turned angry. "You've been spying on us for them?"

Liliy shrugged. "If that's what you want to call it. But I didn't come here to spy on you."

"Then why did you come here?"

"At the time is was out of concern for Optimus' wellbeing. He did get hit in the face with a tree."

"I took care of that."
"After that it became a game of how long would it take for before someone noticed."

"I take it someone did?"

"Optimus. But only after he got his memories back. Even in this form, he recognized me."

"And who exactly are you?"

"My designation is Scythe. But in this form, I go by Liliy. Liliy Scythe, among other things." She glanced at Fowler.

"Wait," Arcee finally piped up. "You keep saying 'in this form'. You aren't human?"

"No more than you are a motorcycle."

"So you're a pretender." Ratchet didn't bother to disguise the disgust in his voice.

Liliy frowned. "No. This form is my alt mode."

"Alt mode or armor, you took that form to blend in with the natives, so you are a pretender."

"If that is the case, I'm a pretender in more ways than one," she replied, her thoughts momentarily going to the Leecher armor. There were a few raised optic ridges at her statement but she didn't bother to elaborate. The Leecher armor was a secret that she never bothered to share with Optimus.

"Anyway, Ratchet, why do you dislike the CRC so much?"

"Where would you like me to start? The list just got longer."

Before Liliy could answer, her phone rang. She grabbed it out of her pocket.

"What is it?" she snapped. Her anger turned to a calm command as she replied to the caller. "Keep a close watch on his spark. I'll be right there." She looked up at the Autobots, as she put away her phone. "I'm afraid we'll have to finish this some other time. My services are needed in the medbay."

Her visor falling over her eyes, Liliy turned and walked toward the entrance tunnel. Not caring that they were all watching, she called up a ground bridge and disappeared thru it.

Ratchet turned to Optimus as the portal vanished, his optics full of questions.

"Don't be so hard on Liliy, Ratchet," Optimus said. "It's not easy being a leader. You should know that."

"Leader?" Ratchet asked, confused.

"Hang on, Prime," said Fowler. "Are you saying that Liliy is…?"

"The leader of the Cybertronian Rebel Corps, yes."

"You're kidding."

"But she's so small."

"Height does not determine one's ability to command respect and loyalty from one's subordinates. Especially when said subordinates are former Decepticons."

"Liliy used to be a Decepticon?"
Optimus shook his helm. "As far as I know, Liliy and Leecher are the only two who were not Decepticons before they formed the CRC."

"Leecher?" asked Arcee, "The CRC's SIC? The one grounder who could easily be mistaken for a vehicon at a distance?"

"They were not inclined to share their past with me. But according to Liliy, they were neutral when they helped her escape from Cybertron."

"Optimus, there is something else about Liliy you aren't telling us, isn't there?" asked Fowler. Optimus hesitated. While the other three were too young to remember, Ratchet would most certainly recognize Liliy's clan. And he wasn't sure how the old medic would react to the information.

"I think it best that Liliy tells you herself." The statement seemed to be directed at Ratchet.

"Fine," said Agent Fowler. "But I want to be kept in the loop because I will eventually have to make a full report to my superiors."

"Very well, Agent Fowler. We will inform you when Liliy returns."

"Hey, you three."

The children looked from where they sat on the couch.

"Liliy!" exclaimed Miko as she jumped up to give her a hug. "Where have you been? Raf said you came back but then we couldn't find you."

"And you didn't bother to call me again?"

"Well, when we mentioned it, Optimus said you were busy," said Raf.

"Ah. Yes. There was an emergency at home that I had to attend to."

"Are you back now?" asked Jack.

"For a little while. Actually that is why I am here. There is something important I need to tell you." She sat on the edge of the chair. "Will you turn the TV off and listen to me for a bit?"

Jack obligingly turned off the TV and he and Raf set aside the game controllers as Miko sat back on the couch to listen.

"See, the thing is… I don't know if you guys have noticed anything strange about me at all. Maybe in the way I acted or my weird knowledge?"

"We hang out with giant alien robots," said Miko. "You seem pretty normal compared to that."

"Although, Miko is weird by herself."

Miko punched Jack in the arm.

Liliy managed a smile. "Not all Cybertronians are giant, you know."
"Oh, I figured that. There's probably some out there that are so small that they transform into a phone." She pulled her phone. Gasping suddenly, she tossed it down on the coffee table. "What if my phone is one?"

"Ha. It's alright. It's not."

Miko pointed at Liliy. "What if yours is?"

"It is not either. But I am."

Silence. They stared at her, wondering if they heard right.

"You are...?" Raf hedged, hoping she would clarify.

"I am a Cybertronian. Not a human."

"REALLY?" Miko shrieked suddenly, while the boys stared on in surprise. "Can you transform? Can we see your root mode?"

"Of course." Liliy stood up and stepped away from the chair. Her visor fell over her eyes as her hololayer flickered off to reveal basically a metal mannequin. Plates split and shifted, some of them turning over on themselves. When the transformation was complete, she was a whole head taller and not nearly as flat-chested. The biolights on her thighs and arm glowed red. Paired with the other red bits scattered over her frame, they accented her gray and platinum armor quite nicely.

The children stared up at her in awe as she spun around to give them a full view.

"Well, what do you think?" she asked.

A loud clatter interrupted anything they were about to say. Ratchet was in the medbay and upon seeing Liliy in her root mode suddenly dropped whatever he was holding. He was now staring at her in surprise and shock and no small amount of fear.

Liliy frowned. "Something wrong, Doctor?"

"You are a Laserblade...?" Ratchet asked.

"I am."

"What's a Laserblade?" asked Raf. He could see his reflection on Liliy's visor as she looked at him.

"The Laserblades were a small clan," she answered. "Small in number and in stature." She waved her servo over her helm to indicate her height. "I think the tallest among us was maybe 10 feet. It wasn't uncommon for us to be confused with minicons."

"Minicons?" asked Jack.

"Minicons are small Cybertrionians that form a link with a larger Cybertronian and can transform to become part of their frame. Like Laserbeak. However, Laserblades are incapable of making such a link due to the..." she hesitated, looking for the right word, "'instability' of our sparks."

That perked Ratchet's interest. "Instability?"

"It's not instability per say but my spark would be considered highly unstable if it was compared to yours or most others. That is normal for my kind though. And because the difference, we can't even sparkbond outside of our clan."
"So why are you called a 'Laserblade'?' asked Miko.

"Named after, well, our weapons, though, I am sure they were originally meant to be just tools." She transformed the rod out of her forearm and formed the crescent blade around her fist.

"Is that a shaped laser?" Raf asked in awe.

"Yes. This is the general shape for sword users to start with. My preferred blade to use is my namesake: the scythe." She transformed the crescent blade into her scythe.

"How big can you make the blade?" Miko again.

"I don't really know." She deactivated the blade and transformed the staff back into her arm. "The bigger the blade, the more energy it consumes. I suppose I could make a fairly large one but it would last for a couple seconds at most. But even that short amount of time would be lethal to anyone or anything in its path."

"Early on," said Ratchet, "when I was just a young bot starting out as a medic, I got to see the aftermath of just how lethal a Laserblade can be. It's not something one can easily forget."

"We were originally meant to help with the mining of energon," explained Liliy, "but there were some who would contract themselves out as assassins. But that explains why you're afraid of me."

"I'm not-"

The roar of a diesel engine announced the return of Optimus from patrol. He transformed upon entering the main room.

"Hey, O.P." Liliy waved at him.

"Liliy." He looked slightly startled to see her in her root mode. He glanced at Ratchet as the medic came over to him, frowning.

"You knew that she was a Laserblade and didn't warn me?" Ratchet asked in a low voice.

"I apologize. I was not sure how to tell you. How long has she been here?"

"Not long. She has just been explaining her origins to the children."

"You knew that she was a Laserblade and didn't warn me?" Ratchet asked in a low voice.

"I apologize. I was not sure how to tell you. How long has she been here?"

"Not long. She has just been explaining her origins to the children."

"So how old are you really?" They heard Miko ask.

"Right around Ratchet's age."

"You're joking."

Liliy turned to look at Ratchet. "No... I might be a few stellar cycles younger but I am definitely closer to your age than I am the other three. I remember Cybertron before the war started."

"What about Optimus?" asked Raf.

Liliy studied the Prime for a moment before answering. "His spark is the oldest. Though, his frame suggests otherwise, so I'm not really sure."

"What do you know of his frame?" inquired Ratchet.

"He was well on his way to joining the AllSpark the first time I met him. As one of the CRC's
"medics, I had to help repair him."

"Speaking of repairs, how are the twins?" asked Optimus.

"They are finally out of danger of deactivation but we are waiting for them to wake up on their own. And everyone hopes it is soon because Echo has been a pain to deal with these last few days."

"Echo?"

"Echo is trined with the twins. And if it wasn't for his sparkbond with Alfa, he probably would have gone off the rails by now..." Liliy trailed off at Optimus' startled expression. "What?"

"I didn't know any of them were bonded."

"Well, the war was pretty much over on this planet for quite a few years before you and Megatron brought it here again. They were just settling down."

"How long have you been on Earth?" Miko wanted to know.

"Uh... several thousand years, I think? I haven't been keeping track. That's Leecher's job. I know there were still predacons here when we arrived."

"Predacons?!" Ratchet started.

"What's a predacon?" asked Raf.

"Ancient Cybertronian beasts. You know the medieval mythical creatures, dragons, griffins and the like?" The children nodded at Liliy. "Those were predacons."

"But predacons died out ages ago on Cybertron," insisted Ratchet. "How could they be here too?"

"From what I've heard, Shockwave was working on cloning during the war," explained Liliy. "Perhaps they were his creations."

"That... makes sense."

"Hey, Liliy. I have a question. The family you spoke of? Your 27 brothers?" asked Jack.

"Ah, yes. My family is the CRC. And actually, I wasn't entirely accurate. Five of them are femmes, but I always refer to all of them as my 'boys' because one, I think of them as my children, and two, well... It started out as a running joke because Leecher accidentally mistook Charlie for a mech the first time they met her—not that she really cared since she had the same type of eradicon frame as Alfa and Echo. But, after a while, the term just kind of... stuck."

"What are all their names?" asked Raf.

"We know a few," said Jack. "Leecher, you mentioned him-"


"Alright. You've mentioned them. And Miko and I met Mike and Nova. By the way, they don't get into too much trouble, did they?"

"No. Well, not from me anyway. But Alfa gave them quite a stern lecture."
"There. You mentioned Alfa again."

Liliy smiled. "Yes. Besides Leecher, there is," she started counting off on her digits, "Alfa, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo, Foxtrot, Golf, Hirry, Indy, Julian, Kilo, Lima, Mike, Nova, Oscar, Pepper, Quebec, Romeo, Seaser, Tango, Ucon, Victor, Whiskey, X-ray, Yankee, and Zulu."

"That sounds almost like the American military alphabet," Raf pointed out.

"Yeah. I know. Where do you think that alphabet came from?" Liliy said. She laughed at their looks of disbelief. "Just kidding. Some of them actually went thru a few names before they settled on their current ones. But the, uh, the English alphabet was my idea. Gave me an excuse to stop collecting stray Decepticons. I ran out of letters."

"Which ones are the femmes?" asked Miko.

"Charlie, Hirry, Julian, Lima, and Seaser. They picked the names, not me. The only mech I named was Ucon, but that is a long story."

"Are there any more like you?" asked Raf.

"Laserblades, you mean? No. As far as I know, I am the last. I..." She looked at the floor. "I was not there when the Decepticons destroyed my home. That is why I survived."

"As I recall, your clan was wiped out early on in the war, before I even received the Matrix," said Optimus. "Do you know why they did it?"

"Someone commissioned our clan to take out Megatron," she spoke softly. "I was chosen for the task. I was there. I was right there with my blade against his neck cables. But then Soundwave-" Her vocalizer fritzed into static. Her knees gave out and she slumped to the floor, her whole frame trembling. She stared unseeing at the space before her. "My arm..." Her voice was small and frightened.

Liliy started when a pair of human arms wrapped around her and pulled her helm against the clothes covered chest.

"It's alright." Distantly, she heard Jack speaking. "It's alright. You're ok. You're safe."

She wrapped her arm around him and pulled him closer, still trembling. Offlining her optics, she tried concentrating her other senses on the human hugging her rather than the terrifying memories. There was his heartbeat. The whoosh of air as he breathed in and out. His voice as he continued to speak, mostly repeating that 'it was alright, she was safe' in a quiet voice. His hand running over the top of her helm. His other arm wrapped around her shoulders. The fabric of his shirt against her faceplates and under her servo.

Gradually she stopped trembling and calmed down a bit. She turned her helm a little so she wasn't talking into his chest.

"You have some experience comforting people."

"My mom, after Dad... left," he replied quietly.
Her servo squeezed gently. "I see."

"Are you better now?"

"For the most part, I guess." She looked up at him. "Thank you, Jack." She reached up to cup his cheek. "You are a kind child."

He huffed. "I'm 16, you know."

"Heh, heh." Smiling a little, she ruffled his hair. "And I'm an eons old bot. To me, you'll always be a child."

"Liliy?"

She looked over at the other two children. They stood nearby looking very concerned. She held her hand out to them.

"Come here you two."

Jack stepped back as they ran forward to hug her.

"Sorry for making you worry."

"It's fine as long as you're alright," said Raf.

"But try not to scare us like that again, ok?" added Miko.

Liliy smirked a little. "I'll try my best but I can't make any promises."

"Hmph. And you say Bumblebee suffers from PTSD because he has nightmares while he's in recharge," Ratchet commented. "You just had a breakdown just talking about your traumatic memories."

Liliy looked over at him. "Trust me, Doctor. I am much better now than I was right after I found out what happened to my clan and was forced to flee Cybertron. Honestly, I doubt I would have survived on my own. Leech..." She smiled at the now fond memories playing through her processor. "Leech saved me in more ways than one."

"What about your arm?" asked Optimus. "Why haven't you replaced it yet?"

Liliy exvented. "You are assuming that I can, O.P."

"You can't?"

"Technically, I can but it would never be complete. The knowledge of how to do major repairs on or replace a laser blade was lost with my clan's medics. So I simply went without my whole arm."

"I recall you mentioning something about a prosthetic? Was that just another lie?" grumbled Ratchet.

"No." She smirked. "No, I really do have one. Maybe I'll show you some time."

A loud horn honked in the entrance tunnel. Bulkhead entered with Arcee and Bumblebee trailing behind him.

"Miikooo, I'm baaaack," he said cheerily upon transforming. Then he noticed the unusual
atmosphere of the room. "What's going on?"

"Oh, Lily's back," chirped Bumblebee, pointing up at the femme who had finally gotten back to her pedes.

"Hey." She waved at them.

"So that's your true form? I've never seen anything like it before," said Arcee.

"Well, considering you were just a youngling were the Decepticons wiped out my clan, I'm not surprised. But even before that, we kept to ourselves mostly so not that many people knew about us. Also, Ratchet, there is one more thing you need to know about me since you are a medic."

"What is it?"

"I bleed red but if, for whatever reason, you need to give me a transfusion, regular energon is fine. I'll just be slow for a little while while my frame processes it."

"I think I need to get my audials checked. Did you just say you bleed red?"

"Yes. That's what I said. Would you like me to show you?" Her servo went to an energon tube on her neck.

"No! There's no need for injuring yourself. But red energon… How?"

"The spark." She put her servo over her spark. "Whatever it is that makes a Laserblade's spark different effects the makeup of the energon within our frames, turning it red. So, unless we have had a major transfusion of regular energon, we can be in a near constant state of hyperspeed."

"But doesn't that put a lot of stress on your frame?"

"Sure but my frame was made to endure the extended strain."

"What's red energon?" asked Raf.

"An extremely rare and highly volatile form of energon, when it appears as crystals," explained Ratchet. "Refined into fuel, it provides the power of hyperspeed. But I have never heard of the process that Lily described. To change regular to red after it has been made into fuel? What even are you?"

Lily pushed up her visor. Her red optics were similar to Arcee's, but instead of one optic per eye hole, there were three. One large optic flanked on each side by two smaller ones. She winked at Ratchet.

"A total mystery."
Ratchet practically growled when Liliy entered the main room from one of the hallways. “What are you doing here?”

“I have some information,” she replied as she climbed the stairs to the top tier.

“You could’ve just called,” he retorted.

“But then I wouldn’t get to see your handsome face, Ratchet.” She smiled sweetly at him.

Ratchet went from glaring to sputtering in the span of a second.

Standing in front of the main console, Optimus exvented. “Liliy, why must you harass my medic?”

“Because it’s fun,” she replied with a smirk. “And he has much better reactions than you do.” And winked at him.

Oh. Did I just…?

Liliy thought as the Prime’s optics widened ever so slightly and he looked away from her.

“You said you had information for us,” he said, getting back on topic.

“Yes.”

He looked at her expectantly, one optic ridge raised.

“Well, you see-”

The base’s commlink interrupted her.

{Prime!} Fowler snapped, appearing on the monitor. {What in blazes are your people doing out here? We had an agreement. No collateral damage.}

“I am sorry, Agent Fowler,” Optimus said as all the other Bots gathered behind him to listen. “But all Autobots are present and accounted for.”

{Then explain why I’m receiving reports of two jumbo sized bots mixing it up 20 miles outside Omaha.}

“Decepticons?” asked Ratchet.

“There has been plenty of infighting lately,” agreed Arcee. “Megatron can’t seem to keep his ranks in line.”

“Or perhaps the CRC?” Ratchet shot a glare at Liliy.

“They’re not mine,” Liliy replied. “This is what I was going to tell you about though.”

{Well, I’m just arriving on the scene. Have a look.}

The video changed to show a wrecked spaceship and a bot standing next to it. The camera highlighted the bot and zoomed in.
"I don’t know," Bulkhead commented as he studied the dark blue mech. “Paint job aside, it can’t be Skyquake. Optimus and Bee pounded him into the ground.”

“Before Starscream yanked him back out,” Arcee added. “As some kind of undead terrorcon.”

“I took care of that,” Liliy said.

“But the question still stands, who’s the dance partner?” asked Arcee.

The video moved to pick up another spaceship. This one was intact, rather than plowed into the earth. The camera circled to find another bot. It zoomed in again.

“By the AllSpark,” Ratchet said recognizing the familiar white frame, “it is one of ours.”


{I don’t care if Abraham Lincoln's back! We have to contain the situation before we all wind up on the 11 o’clock news!}

“Alright, alright, Agent Fowler. No need to shout. We’re on it,” said Liliy, moving over to the computers.

“Who made you team leader?” Ratchet asked as Fowler dropped the call.

“I’m not. I just happen to know the coordinates so I was going to open a bridge for you.” She typed in the destination and activated the portal. “I knew Wheeljack had returned. That’s what I came to tell you.”

“No time for arguing. An Autobot needs us. Roll out!” Prime commanded.

Bulkhead wasted no time in complying. He was the first one into the portal, followed by the rest of Team Prime with the exception Ratchet. After the ground bridge powered down, the medic looked over at the computers and realized that Liliy had left as well.

“I suppose it’s fine. She is capable of taking care of herself after all.”

Upon exiting the ground bridge, Team Prime split into two groups. Bulkhead and Optimus went for Wheeljack while Arcee and Bumblebee moved to flank the Decepticon. The Con fired at Bulkhead and Optimus until he was forced to take cover behind a building when Bulkhead shot back.

“Jackie!” Bulkhead exclaimed as he reached his friend.

Wheeljack was kneeling on the ground. His left arm hung useless at his side, an ugly blaster mark marring his shoulder plating. Bulkhead helped him to his pedes.

The Con was now occupied with taking on Arcee and Bumblebee since they had circled around behind him. Realizing his disadvantage, he ran for cover behind another building farther away. That’s when Agent Fowler got too close in his jet. The Con quickly scanned it for his vehicle mode, then turned to run off.

“Oh, no you don’t!” shouted Wheeljack, activating the blaster on his good arm to fire at the Con.
“Wheeljack!” warned Prime.

“Jackie, no!” Bulkhead cried.

Despite the warning cries, Wheeljack still fired. The building the Con had chosen to hide behind was a gas station. Wheeljack’s first shot hit one of the pumps causing it to explode. That caused a chain reaction that had the whole place engulfed in a giant fire ball.

The Con came blasting out of the smoke in his new alt mode. He looped around and flew past Fowler. Wheeljack continued to shoot at him until he was out of range.

“Dreadwing rigged to place to blow,” he snapped finally deactivating his blaster.

“Dreadwing?” asked Bulkhead, confused.

“Actually that was your handiwork, Sparky,” said Arcee.

“It’s called a gas station,” explained Bulkhead. “Kind of like an energon depo. It doesn’t mix well with blaster fire.”

“Huh. Well, our Con’s getting away.” Wheeljack turned to head to his ship.

Optimus quickly intercepted him. “Wheeljack, there are other considerations. While upon this world, you would do well to follow my lead.”

“Besides, you really should have that arm checked out before you do anything else,” said Liliy, appearing on Optimus’ shoulder.

“Liliy! You followed us?” asked Bulkhead.

“Naturally.”

“Agent Fowler?” Optimus spoke into his comm since Fowler still in the air. “Can we leave the human authorities and damage control to you?”

{Yes. But getting rid of that ship is going to be problematic.}

“Oh, I can take care of that.” Liliy pull out her phone, pushed a button and put the device to her ear. “I need a clean-up crew to my location. … No casualties. One injured but we’ll leave him to Ratchet. There is a wrecked ship and a burning fuel station though. … Wheeljack. … Not yet. … That’s fine. Thank you.”

“My name was mentioned why?” Wheeljack asked as she hung up.

“Lima wanted to know why there was a burning fuel station,” Liliy replied. A ground bridge opened nearby. “Oh, they’re here.”

“That was fast,” said Bulkhead.

“That should expected. They’re my ‘boys’ after all,” proclaimed Liliy proudly.

“Isn’t that bridge a little big though?” asked Arcee.

“Nah. Kilo is just that tall. Plus they have to get the ship back thru.”

A moment later a mech appeared. He was just over twice the height of Optimus and definitely
bulkier. To the surprise of the other Autobots, Optimus stepped toward him.

“Good to see you again, Kilo.”

The blue gray mech looked down at them. “Hello, Optimus. Madam.”

“Hey, Kilo. Anyone else coming?” Liliy asked.

“We’re here, Madam,” said a large grounder as he and a tall flier stepped out of the portal, followed by X-ray and Whiskey.

“Hello, everyone,” greeted Optimus.

“Hey, Optimus,” X-ray replied cheerily.

“Hurry up and get that ship,” griped the flier, a femme. She was about Prime’s height and painted light grey. “We’re wasting energon the longer we keep that portal open.” She headed over to take care of the fire carrying something looked like a modified water gun.

“Yeah, yeah, Charlie.” X-ray waved her off once her back was turned.

“So why are we picking up this ship?” grumbled the grounder. He was closer to Megatron’s height and just as massive. His armor was olive green and tan.

“Thought you could use another project, Bravo,” Liliy replied with an amused smile that only grew when she heard Charlie’s faint ‘Power up and Energize’ in the background.

Bravo just stared at her.

Liliy laughed. “Actually it’s a favor to Agent Fowler. You guys ok from here? I’m gonna go back with the Bots.”

“Wait. What about that ship?” asked Whiskey, pointing at the Jackhammer.

“Ah.” Liliy looked over at Wheeljack. He was holding his injured arm again. She turned back to Whiskey. “Do you want to move it?”

“Oh. I’ll do it!” volunteered X-ray.

“You better get it there in one piece,” warned Wheeljack.

“Or what, Short Stuff?” X-ray teased. “You’ll tan my hide?”

“I don’t know what that means,” Wheeljack admitted over Bulkhead and Acree’s snickering.

“It’s one of Earth’s many ways to say ‘kick your aft’,“ Liliy supplied, unable to keep the amusement out of her voice.

“Why didn’t you just say that?” Wheeljack stepped up to X-ray, glaring up at the taller mech. “Yes. I will kick you aft if you break the Jackhammer.”

X-ray winked at him. “I’ll try my best not too.”

Wheeljack just continued to glare at him.

“Well, call if you need anything,” Liliy said to her ‘boys’. “We’ll be heading back.”
The mechs waved as they gathered around Dreadwing’s ship that Kilo was dislodging from the ground. It was also quieter over by the gas station as Charlie was quickly putting out the flames with some sort of foam. Optimus called for a bridge from Ratchet and the Autobots returned to base with Lilyp.

“Ugh. I was hoping you would stay gone,” Ratchet groaned upon their arrival.

“So sorry to disappoint you, Ratch,” Lilyp said with a smirk. “But I wanted to hear Wheeljack’s story.”

“It seems some things have changed since I was here last,” Wheeljack commented, eyeballing Lilyp with suspicion.

“Well, you can talk while I have a look at your arm,” Ratchet said as he grabbed Wheeljack by his good arm and dragged him over to the medbay. He pulled out a med berth. “Sit.”

Wheeljack rolled his optics at the command but he obeyed anyway, sitting on the med berth while the others gathered around to listen. Lilyp was still perched on Optimus’ shoulder.

“Look, commander,” Wheeljack said as Ratchet started to work on his arm. “Apologies for the fireworks. Won’t happen again.”

Lilyp snorted at that. Optimus shot her a warning look.

“But I tracked Dreadwing across a hundred light years of space,” Wheeljack continued.

“I thought you were roving the galaxy,” interrupted Bulkhead. “Ya know, looking for Autobot refugees.”

“I was,” answered Wheeljack. “Until I found one. A Wrecker.”

“Who?” asked Bulkhead, surprised.

“Seaspray.”

“Hah!” Bulkhead laughed. “How is ol’ Barnacle Butt?”

“Not so good, Bulk. Blown to bits, actually.”

“What?!” Bulkhead stumbled back a few steps. “No!”

The other Autobots closed their optics in a moment of silence for their fallen comrade.

“Dreadwing,” Optimus stated.

“My flyer,” Wheeljack began his tale, “the Jackhammer, picked up Seaspray’s signal a couple of light years from Madiran. We made contact and arranged a rendezvous in the Dromidon System. But Dreadwing must’ve intercepted the transmission ‘cause he got to Seaspray first. A proximity bomb. Supposed to take us both out. Guess I should be glad the Jackhammer can take a punch. I picked up Dreadwing’s ion trail and tracked it through a dozen solar systems before catching up with him. And he led me right back to this marble. Some coincidence, huh?” he finished.

“I know of this Dreadwing,” said Optimus. “He was captain of a seeker armada and as such, like his twin Skyquake, fiercely loyal to the Decepticon cause. Dreadwing has no doubt traveled to
Earth to pay allegiance to his one true master.”

“And perhaps to confirm the death of his twin,” added Liliy.

“What do you mean by that?” asked Bulkhead.

“Dreadwing and Skyquake were split-spark twins, therefore they shared a bond. I’m sure that Dreadwing felt it when his brother died but he has come here to confirm it as well.”

“Whatever the reason,” Wheeljack said as he brushed aside Ratchet’s servos and stood up, “he better enjoy the visit. Cause it’s gonna be his last.”

Ratchet groaned in annoyance but let Wheeljack be for the moment.

“Wheeljack,” Prime said, a warning in his voice. “This planet is heavily inhabited. Any strike we make against the Decepticons must be carefully measured, as a team, lest we risk endangering the human population.”

“Are you suggesting we sit back and do nothing?” Wheeljack growled.

“That’s not-” Liliy started.

“You!” Fowler’s sudden appearance interrupted her. “Loose cannon! Your cowboy antics almost blew our cover!”

“Cover?” asked Wheeljack.

“We’re robots in disguise, Jackie,” Bulkhead explained. He gently poked his friend’s good shoulder. “You need a earth based vehicle mode outside of here.”

“That spaceship you shot down!” yelled Fowler. “Not earth based! If it wasn’t for Liliy’s people, I would have had to jump thru some big hops to get it hauled out of plain sight! You need to keep a tighter leash on your people, Prime.”

“A tighter leash?” Wheeljack finally turned to face the human fully. “Let me clarify, Tiny…”

“Jackie,” Bulkhead warned as Wheeljack approached Fowler.

The white mech got right up in Fowler’s face. “I’m not one of Optimus Prime’s people.” He turned and started to stalk off.

“Hey, Wheeljack,” called Ratchet. “I’m not done with your arm.”

Wheeljack suddenly bumped into another mech that was entering the room from the entrance tunnel.

“Oh. There you are, Short Stuff,” X-ray said. “I got your ship here in one piece.”

“I hope you didn’t just leave it sitting out,” Arcee commented.

“Of course not. It’s in the cave up top.” X-ray pointed at the high ceiling.

“Eh? Then how did you get in here?” asked Bumblebee.

“The front door.” X-ray jerked his thumb digit over his shoulder. Everyone just stared at him. He smiled before explaining. “Well, when you have the ability to move as fast as a Laserblade,
walking on vertical surfaces is easy.”

“You wasted your red En on that?” Liliy asked, rubbing her temple.

“I didn’t know how to get in up there,” X-ray complained. “And I couldn’t exactly fly down.”


“The one that going to put you on your aft if you don’t get back over to the medbay and let Ratchet finish repairing your arm.” Liliy was standing on Prime’s shoulder now, still human but her eyes glowed red as she glared down at Wheeljack. “While you may not want to take orders, I will stand by Optimus and say that there are some rules you have to follow while on this planet. Even the Decepticons follow them so there are no exceptions. Got it?”

“Yeah. Yeah. But only if you prove it.”

“Prove what?”

“That you’re a Laserblade.”

Her mouth curved up in an unsettling smile a second before she disappeared. A moment later, Wheeljack was regretting his words when his pedes were yanked out from under him and he landed painfully on his back and jarred his injured shoulder. Liliy appeared on his chest plates as a Laserblade and smirked at him.

“It’s dangerous to ask a former assassin to prove themselves, you know. Now, please return to the medbay, Wheeljack.”

“Yeah,” he agreed thru clenched denta.

Liliy jumped off him and X-ray helped him back to his pedes. The blue mech followed him over to the medbay and stood by while Wheeljack sat back on the med berth. Ratchet huffed in annoyance but went back to fixing his arm. Bulkhead joined them as well.

“So I take it the new guy has a problem with authority,” said Fowler, watching them.

“Wheeljack and Bulkhead served together in the Wreckers,” replied Optimus. “A combat unit that operated outside the normal chain of command.”

“Hm. Black Ops.”

“They accepted missions no one else would and many of them did not come back,” said Optimus.

“So, these are your true colors?” Fowler asked, turning to Liliy and looking her over as she walked up to him.

“Hm? Oh, right. You weren’t here when I transformed for the children.”

Fowler pinched the bridge of his nose. “Great. Put the civilians even more at risk.”

“You didn’t even know about the CRC till the DNGS incident. Or human me, for that matter.”

“I felt something was off about you from the beginning, though,” argued Fowler. “I just couldn’t put my finger on it. That was also when we encountered MECH for the first time. Then the CRC conveniently showed up to help us.”
Liliy pushed up her visor. “Agent Fowler, I sincerely hope you are not suggesting that we were working with those fleshbags.”

Fowler shifted uncomfortably. She wasn’t glaring, just staring. He had been stared at like that before, a common occurrence when he started working with the Autobots. It had just been annoying back then, but, for some reason, this was worse. It felt like a genuine threat.

“Liliy!” Prime’s servo was suddenly between them, cupping protectively around Fowler, blocking him from the femme.

Blinking, Liliy jerked and looked around. “What?”

The Autobots were staring at her in shock.

“Oh.” She realized that they all could feel her menacing aura. Taking a few steps back and letting her visor fall back over her optics, she calmed herself.

“The CRC only learned about MECH at the same time you did,” she said. “We have no interest in keeping track of humans. Only Cybertronians.”

Fowler nodded thanks to Optimus as he removed his servo. “And how exactly do you do that?”

“The Spark Detection System or SDS.” She touched the armor over her spark. “I have the ability to sense the spark of any Cybertronian around me within a certain radius, even if they are cloaked or shielded. Bravo, my chief engineer, was able to build a device that amplified that ability to encompass the entire planet.”

“So this base doesn’t hide the Autobots?” Fowler asked.

“Not from me.”

“And the Decepticons? Could you tell me where their warship is?”

“I could. But I’m not going to.”

“What about Dreadwing?” asked Wheeljack as Ratchet was finishing his repairs. “Where is he now?”

“Hmm.” There was a brief pause as she accessed the SDS via her visor. “It seems he’s left the Nemesis. Alone.”

“Wheeljack, Optimus told you-” Ratchet started.

“Yeah. I know. I heard him.” Wheeljack stood up and rolled his previously injured shoulder and then lifted his arm and made a fist.

“Try not to do anything strenuous. Your arm needs time to heal,” Ratchet told him.

“Sure, doc.” He turned to X-ray. “Let’s go have a look at my ship. I need to check it for damages.”

X-ray glanced over at Liliy who replied with a nod before answering. “Sure, if Bulkhead’ll show us how to get up there.”

“Uh, yeah.” Bulkhead looked up at the Prime. “With your permission, Optimus.”

“Of course,” Optimus replied.
Bulkhead led Wheeljack and X-ray thru the back hallways and up to the top of the butte. The Jackhammer was sitting a cave across from the silo’s launch doors. Wheeljack started down one side, inspecting for damages as he went. X-ray pulled down his mask as he went down the other side, scanning for damages under the surface.

Still frustrated about Dreadwing, Wheeljack slammed his fist against the ship’s paneling. “I can’t believe this.”

“Jackie.” Bulkhead sighed. “Look, even if weren’t for the humans we couldn’t take on the Cons right now. We’re outnumbered.”

Wheeljack spun to face him. “Roadbuster, Pyro, Impactor, Rotostrom, Seaspray. All dust.”

“That’s what I’m talking about. Wreckers are Autobots. There just aren’t that many of us left. But if we get behind Optimus, we have a chance to end this. Once and for all.”

“Guys like Optimus they talk a good game but when you’re in the scrap, they don’t wanna get their servos dirty.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. You don’t know Optimus like I do. Being a Wrecker meant everything to me, but I left that behind-”

“Because Prime was the real thing. Blah blah blah.”

“Hey, now,” X-ray said as he came around the back of the ship. “Don’t be bashing Optimus, Short Stuff. From what I know of him, he is the father to Team Prime as the Madam is the mother to the Cybertronian Rebel Corps.”

Bulkhead laughed. “Ya lost me again.”

“Because Prime was the real thing. Blah blah blah.”

“Hey, now,” X-ray said as he came around the back of the ship. “Don’t be bashing Optimus, Short Stuff. From what I know of him, he is the father to Team Prime as the Madam is the mother to the Cybertronian Rebel Corps.”

Bulkhead laughed. “Ha. Your mother is tiny.”

“Isn’t she?” X-ray chuckled.

“Ya lost me again,” said Wheeljack.

“Well, if you stick around this time, you’ll understand,” replied X-ray. “But, to put it simply, if something happened to one of us, the Madam would not sit idly. Same goes for Optimus.”

“Hmh. If you say so.” Wheeljack didn’t sound too convinced. “By the way, why do you have that mask?”

X-ray reached up and pulled off the mask. He turned it over in his servos. “Because I used to be a Vehicon.”

“The others too?”

“All of us. The Madam and Leecher saved our lives and in return we followed them. So far, life as a rebel has been much better than being a Decepticon.”

“But why keep the mask?”

“To serve as a reminder. That and it’s incredibly useful-”

The ship’s comm beeped, interrupting him. Wheeljack hurried onto the Jackhammer to listen to the message.
“Wheeljack, I know you’re out there listening. I have a proposition for you.”

“Is that…?” asked Bulkhead who had followed him.

“Dreadwing,” Wheeljack confirmed.

“Meet me at these coordinates, if you have the spark.” The coordinates appeared on the ship’s monitor.

“I’ll you there, Con. Just to watch you fry.”

“Jackie, it’s a trap,” warned Bulkhead as Wheeljack took the pilot’s seat.

“I know. But when has that ever stopped me.” He pushed a few buttons to start the ship’s engine. He glanced back at Bulkhead. “You coming with?”

The big wrecker thought about it for a second and slid into the other seat. “At least let me call for backup.”

“You know Wreckers don’t call for backup.”

“They call for clean-up!” they both said together and then grabbed servos in a special Wrecker handshake.

“I’m coming too,” said X-ray, standing behind them.

Wheeljack looked back at him. “You sure? I’ve only got two seats.”

“Unfortunately for you, Short Stuff, I have orders.”

“To keep me from getting into trouble?”

“If that were the case, I would have already disabled your ship. No. My orders are just to stay close and offer assistance if needed.”

“Seems to me that Lily is more lax than Prime.”

“Well, the Madam feels that having someone on site makes it easier to intervene. Part of the reason she still hangs out at this base.”

“Fine. Just don’t get in my way.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Bulkhead and X-ray stayed back while Wheeljack went to face Dreadwing. When Dreadwing led him into the canyon, Bulkhead and X-ray followed along the top. The Decepticon purposefully ran into a dead end and let himself get cornered.

Wheeljack retracted his battle mask as he stepped closer to the Con with his swords at the ready. “If you’re thinking about flyin’ outta here…” He glanced up.

“Think again!” finished Bulkhead, standing at edge, looking down with both blasters ready.

Dreadwing just smirked. Knowing that meant nothing good, Wheeljack jerked his helm up and
spotted the bomb right below Bulkhead.

“BULKHEAD!” he shouted, turning away from Dreadwing and completely missing X-ray sliding down to tackle the Con from behind.

Dreadwing dropped his detonator as he shook X-ray off but the bomb was already active. The blast cause a landslide, bringing Bulkhead and a ton of rocks down on Wheeljack.

X-ray found himself face down on the ground, his legs pinned under the pile of rocks that had buried the Wreckers. A shadow passed over him and he looked in time to glimpse Dreadwing as the Con’s fist came down to meet his helm.

“X-Ray. Wake up.” That was Liliy’s voice.

“Come on, X. This isn’t the time to be sleeping.” Wheeljack smacked his cheek.

Opening his optics, X-ray reached up and swatted Wheeljack’s servo away from his helm.

“Stop it,” he grimaced. “My helm is already pounding without you hitting it.”

“What happened?” asked Liliy. She was standing on the rocks next to his helm. “You’ve got a nice dent there.”

“Dreadwing knocked me out after my legs got stuck under the rockslide.”

“So you did not see him take Bulkhead?” asked Optimus. He was standing behind Wheeljack.

“He took Bulkhead?” X-ray repeated.

“It looks that way,” answered Wheeljack. “I doubt Bulk would’ve up and left us.”

“Then there’s no time to waste.” X-ray started to stand. “We need to go after them.”

“Easy there.” Wheeljack helped him to his pedes and steadied him.

“Are you sure, X-ray?” asked Liliy.

“Even if you order me to stand down, I’m going to see this thru, Madam.”

“Very well,” Liliy replied immediately.

“Whoa. No hesitation. Shouldn’t he rest a bit though?” asked Wheeljack.

“He will,” replied Liliy. She returned to her spot on Prime’s shoulder. “On your ship, while we fly to Bulkhead’s location.”

“Can you walk, X?” Wheeljack was holding on to him.

“Yeah. I think so.”

“Then let’s go.”

“Which way to Bulkhead?” Wheeljack asked as they left the Jackhammer.
“Somewhere in the middle of all those shipping containers,” answered Liliy.

Stacks upon stacks of colorful metal shipping containers stretched out before them.

“You don’t know exactly?”

“Oh, we do. X-ray, if you please.”

X-ray started down one of the rows with Liliy on his shoulder. Wheeljack and Optimus followed, blasters ready and optics searching for any sign of Dreadwing.

“We are close to population,” Optimus reminded Wheeljack. “Remember…”

“Blasters and fuel pumps don’t mix,” Wheeljack replied.

“We’re really close now,” said X-ray.

They came around a corner to find Bulkhead stuck to a stack of containers with magnetized cuffs. And there was one of Dreadwing’s bombs wired to his chassis with a timer counting down.

“Hey guys,” he greeted with mock enthusiasm.

“Scrud,” Wheeljack swore after the initial shock wore off. He approached Bulkhead. “You really got yourself in a heap of scrap this time, partner.”

“Stay back, Jackie,” warned Bulkhead.

“Better get to work,” Wheeljack said as X-ray came up beside him.

“Have you defused one of these before?” asked Optimus.

Wheeljack carefully opened the bomb up to look at the wires inside. “Fail safes. Dumby leads. Booby traps. It’s a work of art.”

“But can you defuse it?” repeated Liliy.

“If he can’t, I might be able to,” said X-ray, scanning the bomb.

“Do what you can, but do it quickly.” Liliy moved from X-ray’s shoulder to Optimus’.

“Where’s Dreadwing?” he asked quietly so not to disturb the concentration of the other two.

“On top of the crane to your right. You can see him from here.”

Optimus hazarded a glance up at the crane. Dreadwing was actually turned away from them. He appeared to be speaking into his comm.

“Let us see if we can buy them some time.” Optimus turned and walked off.

“Jackie, if you guys don’t abort,” Bulkhead said, “we’re all gonna need clean up.”

“Tryin’ to focus here, Bulk,” replied Wheeljack.

Bulkhead looked up and realized someone was missing. “Where’s Optimus and Liliy?”

Wheeljack turned to look around too but X-ray’s optics never left the bomb.
“Huh. It’s like I told ya,” he said as he turned back. “When the scrap hits the fan blades, the generals are the first to bail.”


X-ray sighed. “There’s no need to be so negative, Short Stuff. Not every commander you meet is going to be a crankshaft.” He spared a glance at the white mech. “Optimus and Liliy went to find Dreadwing. Cause if we can’t defuse this bomb, he will be able to.”

While Dreadwing was still distracted by his comm, Optimus and Liliy snuck closer. He finally noticed that Prime was gone.

“Dreadwing, if you are anything like Skyquake,” Optimus called from behind a stack of containers. “I know that you value loyalty and honor.”

“Is there a point to your bluster, Prime?” Dreadwing replied.

“Only that Megatron knows nothing of those principles. He lives solely for destruction and conquest. But there is another path: Deactivate the bomb.”

“Think he’ll listen?” Liliy asked.

The pile shook as blaster fire tore a hole through the container next to Prime’s helm. And Dreadwing landed not too far away.

“Guess not.” Liliy slipped off Prime’s shoulder to allow him free movements and split away from him.

Optimus drew Dreadwing’s fire to distract him. Firing back, Optimus dodged behind another stack. Dreadwing quickly followed, only to trip, dropping his blaster as he fell on his face. He lifted his helm. Liliy stood in front of him with her hand on her hip and a cocky smirk.

“Hey there. Dreadwing, is it? Would you mind defusing the bomb?” she asked. “Perhaps, in exchange for information about your brother?”

Dreadwing looked startled that a human was even talking to him, but when she mentioned his brother, his optics narrowed into a glare.

“My brother is dead. What more is there?”

“Do you know what happened to his body after he died?”

“Liliy.” Optimus was back and he had his blasters pointed at Dreadwing. “You probably shouldn’t…”

Dreadwing pulled out his detonator. “Tell me. Or the Wreckers perish.”

Liliy put her hand behind her back so that the Con couldn’t see her blade transform out of her arm. “That’s not how this works.”

All he saw was a line of red light, then the top half of his detonator hit the ground next to his servo.

“You defuse the bomb.” She rested her staff on her shoulder, the blade inactive. “Then I share the information.”
There was the noise of pounding pedes two rows over.

“Bulkhead, wait!” Wheeljack shouted.

Just as Bulkhead came around the corner, an electro-charge slammed into his back. His forward momentum sent him stumbling into the pile on his right. Even with the charge surging through his systems, he managed to fall on his back to avoid crushing the bomb. A moment later, Wheeljack came around the corner, followed by X-ray with his blaster still active.

“Frag... that hurts...” Bulkhead ground out.

“Can’t believe you actually shot him,” Wheeljack said to X-ray. He reached down to help Bulkhead, only to jerk his servo away when he got shocked.

“His fault for running.” X-ray looked up and spotted Liliy with Dreadwing and Optimus. “Oh, hey, guys.”

“X-ray, what are you doing?” Liliy asked. “You could’ve detonated the bomb.”

“Actually, I should’ve shot him earlier,” he replied as he moved around Bulkhead to look at the bomb. “It seems I fried the bomb.”

Wheeljack leaned over Bulkhead. This time he didn’t get shocked. “Oh, you’re right. The timer stopped.”

“Then hurry and remove it,” Liliy ordered.

“Yes, ma’am.”

X-ray and Wheeljack helped Bulkhead sit up before they started removing the wires from his frame.

Dreadwing pushed himself up to his knees. “The bomb has been deactivated. Tell me the information you promised.”

“But you were not the one who deactivated it. I don’t have to tell you anything.” She stepped closer and lowered her voice. “I suggest you leave now, while Wheeljack is distracted.”

Dreadwing glanced up at Optimus.

“He won’t stop you. But if you try anything…” She twirled her staff. “You’ll end up like you’re detonator.”

Dreadwing got to his feet. “I will find out what you know.”

“If you get the chance before that, ask Starscream. Though, I doubt he’ll tell you what happened.”

Dreadwing regarded her for a moment after he picked up his blaster. He glanced at Optimus who was still watching him warily before he turned and walked away. Once he was clear of all the containers, he transformed and flew away.

“Tch. You let him go, didn’t you?” asked Wheeljack, after they finished removing the bomb.

“Of course.” Liliy’s staff disappeared back into her arm. “We won’t kill another Cybertronian unless it is absolutely unavoidable.”
“And if he had blown us up?”

“My hand might’ve slipped then.” She shrugged. “No one is perfect.”

“Madam, I’m detecting several more bombs located around the area,” X-ray said.

“Yeah. Me too. Dreadwing’s backup. He just couldn’t activate them because I broke his detonator.” She kicked one of the halves at her feet. Turning, she looked up at Optimus. “You guys can head back. X-ray and I will handle clean-up.”

“Very well.”

“Hey, Short Stuff. Stick around the planet this time, ok?” X-ray bumped his fist on Wheeljack’s shoulder. “Maybe you’ll learn a thing or two.”

“Whatever you say, X.”
“There’s going to be more trouble with the officers again,” ZS-03 said as she sat down at Ucon’s table in the breakroom on the Nemesis.

“Why do you say that?” ZZ-04 asked. He was sitting next to Ucon.

“I just heard Megatron order Dreadwing to get rid of Airachnid.”

“What’s wrong with that?” asked ZX-02, staring at his cube as he swirled his energon. “Nobody really cares about her. Especially after that stunt she tried to pull while Megatron was gone.”

“That’s not the problem,” ZS-03 replied in a low voice, leaning in. “Megatron told him to take backup. SZ-03 told me that Dreadwing and Airachnid just left with Breakdown.”

“With Breakdown? I hope he comes back,” Ucon commented.

“Five! Don’t say things like that!” ZZ-04 cried, elbowing him.

“You’re right. What am I saying? He’ll definitely come back. Excuse me for a moment.” Ucon got up from the table and left the breakroom with his cube.

When the end of their break time came around, he still had not returned. They found out later he had been loitering by the ground bridge, waiting for the officers to come back.

[Protect Breakdown]

Ucon didn’t usually send a direct communication to base unless he thought it was of the utmost importance. And, as usual, without much explanation. Echo immediately located Breakdown’s spark signal. It was off the Nemesis, moving thru a forest with Dreadwing’s and Airachnid’s signals.

Lily was in the rec room with several of the ‘boys’ when Echo called her up to explain the situation.

“Permission to fulfill Ucon’s request?” Tango asked Lily.

“Granted.” She turned to the others in the room. “Kilo, Oscar, Seaser, go with him.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Airachnid shot a bit of webbing and trapped Breakdown’s hammer above his helm when he raised it to smash her. He strained against the webbing, trying to break it. When it didn’t break, she pounced on him. He was able to catch the first swipe of her spider limbs that was aimed at his throat. He jerked, trying to throw her off, and her second strike missed, slicing deep into his shoulder joint instead. He roared in pain and jerked again, this time succeeding in throwing her off. On the ground, she kicked out and knocked him off his pedes. The webbing still didn’t break under
the weight of his body falling, but his injured shoulder did. Breakdown’s arm came clean off as he collapsed.

Lying on his back, the vision in his single optic was starting to blur as multiple warnings popped up on his HUD. His chassis rose and fell rapidly as if quick vents would help lessen the pain. Airachnid was top of him now, smiling triumphantly as she raised her spider limb to strike.

“BREAKDOWN!”

An orange blur slammed into the femme, knocking her off of him. A small part of Breakdown relaxed, recognizing that voice and that bright colored frame. His helm fell back as he tried to slow his vents.

Tango threw Airachnid against the rocks. She crumpled to the ground as a few warnings flashed across her own HUD. She lifted her helm to look up at her attacker. Orange and silver, he was about the same size as Knock Out. But his faceplates were hiding behind a vehicon mask.

“I’ll leave her to you, big guy,” Tango said.

He stepped aside and a hulking frame took his place. Airachnid tried to scramble away but she was immediately picked up and then slammed to the ground on her back. She tried to thrash at the servo pressing her to the ground but the huge mech only pressed harder. Optics wide with fear, she gasped painfully as she felt her frame slowly being crushed into the dirt.

“Ease up a little there, big guy,” said Oscar, as he joined Kilo. “You just need to restraint her, not flatten her.”

Much to Airachnid’s relief, Kilo did pull back slightly. Oscar knelt next to her injured spider limb and pulled out his medical kit.

“What are you doing?” Airachnid watched the other copterbot suspiciously.

“My job. I’m a medic.”

“Who are you people?” she snapped. The fact that they were wearing vehicon masks made her uncomfortable.

“No one to be trifled with,” said Kilo, his voice surprisingly soft for someone his size. “So don’t get any ideas.”

Tango went back to Breakdown as Seaser knelt next to the Con. Breakdown didn’t understand why. Maybe it was the masks, even though the frames did not match, but for some reason he felt safe with these bots he barely knew. He felt no distress at all as the teal and silver femme started to work on his shoulder.

“Tango. What are you doing here?” Breakdown asked, focusing on the orange mech.

“Just hold still and let us treat your wounds, Breakdown,” Tango replied as he watched Seaser apply a field patch to the Con’s shoulder.

Breakdown’s arm dangled above their helms, still trapped in Airachnid’s webbing with the hammer still activated.

“Hey, big guy, could you get that limb for us?” Tango asked.
Kilo reached back and swiped a claw at the webbing. It snapped like old rope and the appendage dropped into Tango’s servos.

“There now. I stopped all the bleeding. You should be fine.” Seaser helped Breakdown sit up.

“I just finished up too,” said Oscar, wiping his servos off with a cloth from his subspace.

“So, what do we do with her?” asked Kilo as he lifted Airachnid off the ground again. She squirmed his grasp. “I’ll get you all for this.”

“For treating your wound?” asked Oscar with a chuckle.

“For mech-handling me, you imbecile!” she hissed.

“Ah. Sorry but that was for our protection.”

“What should I do with her?” asked Kilo again.

“Hmmm.” Oscar’s servo went to his chin in a thoughtful pose as he scanned the landscape. “There’s a lake just over there.” He pointed at the trees.

Kilo looked in the direction he pointed, scanning the landscape as well. “I see it.”

“What? No. Wait! WAIT!” Airachnid screamed as she flew thru the air.

“Nice lobe, big guy,” laughed Tango.

“We were supposed to get rid of her,” grumbled Breakdown. “Megatron isn’t gonna be happy.”

“If he wanted it done right, he should’ve done it himself,” said Seaser.

“Are you saying that I’m incompetent?” asked Breakdown.

“When it comes to fighting a cunning opponent like her, yes,” Tango admitted. “That’s why we were called.”

“Someone called you to protect me?” Breakdown asked, looked up at the orange mech.

Tango nodded.

Breakdown’s only optic narrowed. “Who?”

“We should get you back,” Tango replied, changing the subject while looking away. “Dreadwing is probably wondering what happened to you.”

“Tango, who called you?” Breakdown demanded.

Tango looked back at him again, his expression indiscernible under his mask. “Are you going to get up and walk by yourself or does Kilo need to carry you?”

“I can walk!” the Con snapped, starting to stand.

Seaser helped him to his pedes and made sure he could stand on his own.

“Let’s go.”
Dreadwing struggled against the layers of webbing that had him pinned to the tree but they refused to break. He tried his comm.

“Breakdown, what is your status?” he asked.

There was a brief static, then, {I’m still alive.}

“Where are you?” he demanded. “What happened to Airachnid?”

{Headin’ back to your location now.} was Breakdown’s reply.

“What about Airachnid?”

Static was his only answer.

“Breakdown? Answer me, Breakdown!” Dreadwing snapped.

“She got away,” said Breakdown as he came into view.

“If that’s what you want to call it,” muttered Tango. He walked beside Breakdown, carrying the Con’s amputated limb.

Dreadwing stared at the group. The four strange bots with Breakdown all wore vehicon masks. He wondered if they were somehow related to the masked, blue mech he had seen with the Autobots a few days before.

“Who are they?” Dreadwing asked Breakdown.

“They’re...” Breakdown hesitated and glanced at Tango.

“We’re Neutrals,” Tango answered for him.

Dreadwing raised an optic ridge. “Neutrals? With vehicon masks?”

“It’s complicated,” said Oscar with a dismissive wave of his servo.

Dreadwing stiffened as Kilo stepped closer. The huge mech reached for him and he had to suppress a flinch. The webbing was no match for Kilo’s strength and ripped easily. Dreadwing was free from the tree in seconds.

“You have my thanks,” he said as he picked up his blaster and returned it to its place on his back.

“Then please make sure that Breakdown gets back to the Nemesis,” Tango replied, holding out Breakdown’s limb to him.

“What about Airachnid?” Dreadwing asked, awkwardly taking the limb.

“She flew away,” Tango answered with a shrug.

“So she’s still alive?”

“Yes, she is.”
Breakdown and Dreadwing returned to the Nemesis via a ground bridge. Dreadwing was carrying Breakdown’s arm for him.

“Commander Breakdown, Commander Dreadwing, you’re back,” greeted Ucon.

“ZZ-05…” Breakdown was surprised to see him.

“Yes,” replied Dreadwing. He pushed Breakdown’s limb into the eradicon’s arms. “Please escort Breakdown to the medbay. I need to report to lord Megatron.”

Ucon snapped to attention after accepting the arm. “Yes, sir.”

Dreadwing left first.

“Shall we go, sir?” Ucon hefted the limb over his shoulder and looked up at Breakdown.

Breakdown shook himself and mumbled an agreement. They left together and headed for the medbay. Ucon kept glancing at the larger mech.

“What is it, ZZ-05?” Breakdown asked finally.

“I’m just glad they made it in time,” the eradicon answered, adjusting the weight of the limb.

Breakdown stopped short and stared. “You called them?”

Ucon stopped as well and looked back at him. “...They told you?”

“They just said someone called.” Breakdown grabbed Ucon’s arm and pulled him closer as he hissed, “Five, what have you been doing? If Soundwave catches you-”

“It was a onetime thing,” Ucon protested. “I just wanted to make sure that you came back alive!”

“So you do know them?”

Ucon turned his helm away without answering.

“You told me they were dangerous.”

Ucon’s visor flashed as he looked back at Breakdown again. “Because they are dangerous! Don’t underestimate them just because they’ve saved you a few times.”

Breakdown let go of his arm. “They didn’t kill Airachnid.”

Ucon looked at the floor. “...I knew they wouldn’t.”

“ZZ-05, who are you really?”

Ucon’s helm jerked up. “I am a Decepticon and a member of this crew! For you to suggest that I’m not is-- Damn it! I just didn’t want you to be offlined. Of all the officers, you’re the one the vehicons like most!”

Just then the ZS squad appeared at the end of the hall and spotted them.

“Oh. Commander Breakdown, sir, are you ok?” asked ZS-01, coming up to them.

They saw that his arm was missing. “What happened? Was it Airachnid?”
Breakdown was surprised that they knew about his mission.

“I’m relieved to see that you’re in one piece,” ZS-04 commented.

“Well, mostly,” corrected ZS-02.

“But you’re still functional,” added ZS-05. “That’s the important thing.”

“Oh, there you are, ZZ-05,” said ZS-03 when she realized who was standing next to Breakdown. “We were wondering what happened to you after you left the breakroom.”

“I wanted to be the first to greet the commanders when they returned,” said Ucon.

“Yeah but now you’re late for your shift so AA-00 is going to be mad when they find out.”

Ucon shrugged the shoulder that wasn’t weighed down with a limb. “When don’t I make them mad?”

“True. You better hurry and get the commander to the medbay or Knock Out will have a fit too.”

“You guys better get to work too,” said Breakdown.

“Yes, sir.” They all saluted and walked off.

“I see what you meant,” Breakdown said after they were gone. He smiled down at Ucon. “Thank you for looking out for me, ZZ-05.”

“Somebody’s gotta do it.” Ucon adjusted the weight of the limb again and headed toward the medbay.

Knock Out looked up at the sound of the medbay doors sliding open.

“Breakdown? What in the AllSpark…?” he gasped at the sight of Breakdown, his right arm gone. “On the med berth now!”

Breakdown obeyed immediately. There was no arguing with Knock Out once he knew Breakdown was injured. He always got treated before the vehicons. And they understood why.

Ucon passed the limb to one of the vehicons who helped in the medbay and quietly took his leave.

“I heard that Dreadwing took you and Airachnid with him on a scouting mission,” Knock Out commented as he ran the scanner over Breakdown to check for more injuries. “But it is obvious that it took a turn for the worse. What happened?”

“We were actually supposed to take out Airachnid. But I… I let her taunts get to me and I snapped,” Breakdown admitted quietly. “We could’ve probably taken her if we had worked together.”

“But somehow you managed, right?”

“No. If it hadn’t been for Tango and his group, I wouldn’t’ve come back at all.”

Knock Out paused as he set aside the scanner. “Tango saved you again?”
“Yes.”

“Who did this patch job?” The medic leaned closer to examine the metal patch on Breakdown’s shoulder. “It was really well done.”

“A flyer. She reminded me of Starscream a little bit.”

“Another femme? Those Neutrals are full of surprises.”

Ucon turned a corner to go join up with his squad and found Soundwave blocking his path. He stopped well out of arm’s reach of the silent mech. Though, he wasn’t sure the distance mattered if Soundwave decided to use his tentacles.

“Is there something I can do for you, commander Soundwave?”

The mech’s blank mask lit up as he played back Breakdown’s quiet warning. “If Soundwave catches you—”

Ucon was glad for the mask that covered his face as he mouthed ‘Scrap!’ He squared his shoulders and kept his voice level as he replied. “Having them save Breakdown benefited the Decepticons. I don’t see the problem.”

“Them.” Soundwave replayed the word with a curious tilt of his helm.

“The Neutrals.”

“They didn’t kill Airachnid.” He quoted Breakdown again. He followed up with Ucon’s reply. “I knew they wouldn’t.”

“They don’t kill other people without reason, especially not other Cybertronians. I—” Ucon hesitated, debating on exactly what he could tell Soundwave. “I owe them my life so I’m afraid I can’t tell you anything else. Please let me return to my post.”

For a moment, Soundwave did not move. Ucon was afraid that he wasn’t going to let him go. Finally he nodded once and moved forward. Ucon stepped aside to let him pass. When they were right next to each other, a slender servo fell on Ucon’s shoulder.

Soundwave leaned close and spoke low with his own voice. “Soundwave: Always listening.”

Ucon felt a shiver run down his spinal strut as Soundwave moved away. So far he had been able to stay off Soundwave’s radar. Soundwave probably already knew about the Neutrals but now he knew that Ucon had a connection to them. Surveillance on him specifically was probably going to go up. He was going to have to be more careful from now on.

Airachnid was enraged after finally scrambling out of the lake. She took shelter in an abandoned energon mine that happened to be nearby. There she discovered an insecticon. And, much to her annoyance, Starscream.

“Why are you here?” he demanded. “Decepticons never return to stripped mines.”

“You are not the only rogue Decepticon in need of energon.” She showed him her patched spider limb.
“Was it a run-in with the Autobots? Or did Megatron invite you on one of his field trips?”

“Megatron was otherwise engaged… And I would love to say that I tore his lackey limb from limb but those strangers interfered again.”

“Strangers?” he asked, curious. “What sort of strangers?”

“Mechs with vehicon masks but they looked nothing like vehicons.”

“Oh. Those mechs. They have interfered with a few of my plans as well. If it wasn’t for them, I wouldn’t be in this pathetic state.” He gestured to himself.

“Do you know who they are? Where they come from?”

“Unfortunately, no. But I know they are always helping the Autobots.”

“That’s interesting,” she mused, “because there were no Autobots involved this time. And I think they came specifically to protect Breakdown. Though, I may be reading too much into it.”

“Hm. That is interesting,” he agreed. “Helping Autobots and helping Decepticons? Could they perhaps be…?”

“Be what?”

He looked her in optic. “Neutrals.”

“Neutrals? Surely you jest, Starscream. Neutrals don’t help anyone. They usually flee when they see us coming so they don’t get dragged into the fighting.”

“True. And there is also the question of why the strangers wear vehicon masks.”

“Perhaps they used to be vehicons.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. That’s just- gah! My processor aches just thinking about it.” He rubbed his helm.

Airachnid chuckled. “Maybe you should ask them, if you ever run into them again.”

“I’d rather not.” Starscream glanced over at the insecticon that had been standing quietly while they were talking and he got an idea. “You know, Airachnid, as fellow outcasts, we should consider putting aside our differences. With creature under your control and at our disposal, we might employ it to terminate Megatron, allowing us to rule the Decepticons.”

“Together?”

Starscream ignored her question and started to pace as he fleshed out the plan. “We would simply need to lure Megatron here, away from his support systems, so that we might catch him-”

“With his guard down,” finished Airachnid. “An intriguing proposal… If ruling Decepticons or spending any length of time with you were of the slightest interest to me.”

Starscream spun to face her. “Tha- uh-” he sputtered. He was at loss for words, thinking that his plan had failed.

“Of course, you had me at terminate Megatron,” she continued. “Pay back would be sweet.”
“However you wish to spin it,” Starscream played along.

“I would need to insure my assassin is up to the task.” She gestured for the insecticon to step forward. “Perhaps a test run is in order.”

Starscream realized exactly what she meant. “What?!” he cried. “I thought we were partners?”

“Oh, Starscream. When will you learn?” To the insecticon: “Eviscerate him!”

Starscream groaned as he fought his way out of stasis. He was still in pain to be sure and he wanted nothing more than to go back to sleep but the last thing he remembered was the insecticon was after him so this no time to be resting. The low energon warning flashed across his HUD among others, though it appeared he was no longer leaking. How was that possible? According to the warnings, his self-repair systems were damaged too. He needed to better assess the situation.

Onlining his optics, Starscream found himself laying on his back, staring up at the dark ceiling of a cave. It wasn’t the most comfortable position due to his wings and the unevenness of the cave floor but it didn’t bother him too much at the moment. His main concern was the bot sitting next to him. They heard him shift and turned to look. He stared in astonishment at the double visored mask of a vehicon miner. The miner looked away from him.

“Hey, Mike. He’s awake.”

Starscream followed his gaze as another miner emerged from the darkness. He tried to sit up as the second miner knelt beside him.

“Easy there, Starscream,” Mike said as he gently pushing him back down. “We patched you up as best we could but your leg is barely hanging on. It’s best to try to not move.”

“What happened?” asked Starscream, laying back.

“As far as we saw, you squeezed thru a gap in the wall, freaking out and bleeding,” explained Mike with a wave of his servo in the general direction of where the gap had been. There was a giant pile of rocks there now.

“Then an insecticon tried to follow you by digging,” added Nova. “You panicked and fired off one of your missiles at it. Which caused a cave-in.”

“Is-is it dead?” Starscream squeaked.

“The insecticon?” asked Nova. “Yes. You killed it.”

Starscream relaxed. “That’s good.”

“We’re not out of the woods just yet,” warned Mike. “Airachnid is still somewhere close by and we can’t call for extraction cause both our comms were damaged thanks to you.”

“Then what do we do?” Starscream looked curiously up at one and then the other.

“We wait,” answered Nova. “If we don’t check-in in the next hour, someone will come looking for us.”

Starscream stiffened. “Someone from the Nemesis?”
“No. Someone from our base.” Mike shifted from his knees to his aft to sit more comfortably.

“It seems you don’t remember us, Starscream,” said Nova.

“Eh? What do you mean?” the seeker asked cautiously as the two miners peered down at him.

“Think back to last time you were stuck in a cave,” Nova continued. “Who left you there, holding up a boulder the size of a house, until Megatron pulled you out?”

“It was the Autobots!” Starscream exclaimed.

“And?”

The seeker thought hard. “...And two vehicon miners. But they were bronze-” Mike’s lights clicked on to show Nova’s bronze paint. “...and copper...?”

Nova’s lights came on to reveal Mike’s copper frame.

“IT WAS YOU TWO!!?” he shrieked.

Mike and Nova pinned down his arms and shoulders as he tried to get up.

“Starscream, settle down,” Mike chided.

“LET GO OF ME!” Starscream struggled against them.

“Damnit, mech!” Nova swore. “Your leg!”

There was a distinctive snap and they all froze.

“...What was that?” Starscream hesitated.

“Uh… That was probably your leg…” hedged Mike.

“Or what was left of it,” Nova added bluntly.

They let Starscream push himself up enough that he could see his legs. The left one moved as he commanded, bending slightly. The right one lay flat and motionless. There was hardly anything left of the armor on the upper thigh. The slashed inner strut had snapped off just below the chewed up hip joint so now the only thing keeping his leg attached the rest of his battered frame was a few undamaged wires and tubes that ran up his inner thigh. He wasn’t leaking anymore thanks to Mike’s patch job but there was still a small puddle of fluids underneath him. The whole mess made his processor spin and he promptly passed out.

“Oh. Didn’t realize he was that squeamish,” commented Nova with the hint of a smirk.

“Well, to be honest, it is pretty disturbing,” Mike replied, looking over the damage. “Maybe we shouldn’t’ve riled him up like that.”

“At least he is back in stasis. It should be easier to move him once help arrives.”

“I hope they get here soon.”

Help arrived about an hour later in the form of Leecher. As soon as they saw sorry state that
Starscream was in, they called for the medics and a stretcher. Mike and Nova explained what had happened to Leecher while the medics transferred Starscream onto the stretcher for transport. Leecher insisted that Mike and Nova return to base with them for a checkup in case they were damaged during the cave-in. The cave was not going to go anywhere. They could return later to finish their job.

Because they were not sure how Starscream would react to having repairs done, they kept him a medically induced stasis until they completely replace his damaged leg. That, of course, took several days because they did not have a whole lot of spare parts that would fit him, so Bravo had to forge most of them. And it wasn’t easy because seeker frames needed to be light but balanced for flight. Luckily, having to forge new parts for the twins recently gave him a lot of practice. They also replaced his missing t-cog but deactivated it so he could not transform until he became accustomed to his repaired frame. Once they were finished with his repairs, they let him come out of stasis naturally.

As Starscream slowly became aware of his body again, he glad that he felt no pain. But that wasn’t always a good thing, he reminded himself. His pain receptors could have been disabled and he could still have a hole in his leg. Or worse, his entire leg could be missing. First, he needed to find out where he was. He knew without having to bring his optics online that he was not on the Nemesis. There wasn’t any engine noise or vibrations. He opened his optics and blinked up the grey metal ceiling. The room was small and the monitor next to him showing his vitals suggested to he was on a berth in a private medical room, most likely just off the main medbay.

Starscream closed his optics again and drew in a large vent. He was about find the condition of his frame. He let the vent out slowly as he lifted his helm. With just one optic, he peeked down at his pedes. He had two! That was a good sign. And they both moved at his command. Good, good. Finally pushed himself up into sitting position and looked down at his right hip. It looked as good as new, thank Primus. Now that he noticed, so did the rest of him. All the dents and scraps he had gotten after going rogue had been flattened and buffed out. And he positively gleamed. He smirked at the thought of how jealous Knock Out would be if he could see him right now.

Satisfied, Starscream moved to the edge of the berth and swung his legs down. Gingerly, he stood up, keeping most of his weight on his left leg because he half expected the right one to break again. He sighed in relief when it held. Taking a few cautious steps toward the door, he kept his servo on the berth just in case. There was no discomfort or pain. The door slid open unprompted once he reached it and he found himself looking out at a large medbay.

“Whoa! Look out!”

The sudden exclamation had Starscream stumbling back as soon as he had stepped out of the room. A red and white mech passed in front of him carrying a tray of medical tools. The mech set the tray on the counter and came back.

“Morning, Starscream. Sorry for startling you. How are you feeling?” he asked with a grin. “Any discomfort or anything with the new leg?”

Starscream just stared him, or more precisely, at the vehicon mask that sat on top of his helm.

Foxtrot sighed. He reached up, took the mask off his helm, and stowed it in his subspace, aware that Starscream’s optics never left it until it disappeared. The seeker then blinked and finally looked Foxtrot in the optics.

“Uh, what? Did you say something?”
“I asked how you were feeling,” Foxtrot repeated.

“Fine. I feel great actually. Better than I’ve felt in years.”

“Good. And the new leg? Any problems with it so far?”

Starscream shifted his weight on his right leg. “None so far.”

Foxtrot smiled. “That’s good. Bravo worked hard to make the replacement perfect. You should thank him later.”

“Who’s Bravo? And who are you? Where are we? What happened to those miners? Why do you have that mask? What—”

“Slow down a second, Starscream,” interrupted Foxtrot, holding up a servo. “Let me introduce myself first. My name’s Foxtrot. I’m a medic for the Cybertronian Rebel Corps. You’re at our base. Bravo is our most brilliant engineer. Mike and Nova went to finish the job they were working on when you tried to bring the ceiling down on them. That was several days ago, by the way. And I have that mask because I used to be a vehicon.”

“But that’s—”

“Impossible? No. Just inconceivable to those of you who only see us as disposable drones. We have sparks, you know. Why is it so hard to believe that we would have personalities, emotions, and free wills to go with them?”

“Bu- wha- that’s—” Starscream stuttered, trying to find words. “The vehicons on the Nemesis aren’t like that.”

Foxtrot stared at him. “…Starscream, you were the Decepticon second-in-command for a long time. I refuse to believe that you are that ignorant.”

Starscream opened his mouth but couldn’t think of anything to say, so he just shut it again.

“It’s alright. Just think on that for a while. Now that you’re up, you could probably use a cube, right?” Foxtrot asked with a bright smile.

“My fuel levels are adequate,” Starscream grumbled after checking.

“Nonsense. Your last transfusion was two days ago,” the medic argued, “and now that you are awake, you’ll burn through it faster.”

“I’m fine,” the seeker snapped.

Foxtrot took out his mask and put it on. After a quick scan, he pushed it up.

“Fifty percent is not adequate for someone who is still recovering from major surgery, Starscream. As the medic on duty, my orders are that you refuel.”

Starscream was a little taken back at the hard tone from this mech who so far seemed pretty laid back. He sighed and relented. “Very well.”

“Great!” Foxtrot’s mood instantly brightened. “Let’s head over to the rec room.”

“Eh? But—”
Foxtrot grabbed Starscream’s servo and pulled him toward the door.

“It’s fine. But let me know if your leg does start to bother you, alright?”

Out in the hallway, Foxtrot let him go but made sure the seeker was still following him.

“Isn’t this place a bit too big?” asked Starscream as he looked up at the ceiling that was way above their helms.

“Nah. It has to be that high.” They entered the main hall and Foxtrot pointed. “For him.”

Foxtrot was pretty sure Starscream squeaked as the seeker tried to hide behind his slightly shorter frame, his wings drooping, while staring up, and up, at the giant mech who stood not too far away. He internally winched at the feeling of Starscream’s sharp digits on his back but he kept a smile on his faceplates.

“Hey there, Kilo.” He greeted the other mech with a wave. “Look who finally woke up.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

Kilo looked down at them and nodded at the seeker. “Starscream.”

“Uh, h-hello,” he stuttered with a tiny wave.

“The rec room’s this way.” Foxtrot turned away from Kilo and headed for the end of the hall. Starscream hurried to keep up with him, glancing back at Kilo as they went.

“*That* used to be a vehicon?”

“Kilo used to be a tank actually. But, in order to save his life, we had to transfer his spark to a new frame and the only spare at the time was an eradicon frame. After he got used to it, Kilo found he like flying but he missed the strength of his heavy duty build. It took lots of research and a ton of upgrades to get into his current frame-”

“And I am quite happy with it,” Kilo’s voice carried from down the hall.

Starscream flinched slightly and Foxtrot grinned.

“Go have a seat,” Foxtrot said when they finally entered the rec room. “I’ll get your cube.”

Starscream nodded to him and looked around the spacious room. It seemed larger than the vehicons’ breakroom on the Nemesis, but that might’ve just been because of the high ceiling. A huge monitor hung on the back wall with a variety of chairs facing it. There were a number of tables to the right of the door and the energon dispenser and a bar was set into the wall beyond them.

At one of the table sat a pair of identical flyers playing a game of holographic chess. One of them looked up from the board and spotted him.

“Oh! Starscream’s finally up.”

His twin looked up as well.

“Hey, ‘Scream. Come join us.”
Curious, Starscream moved over to their table. As he sat down, he noticed that the only distinguishing feature between the two was the color of their accent paint.

“How are you feeling?” asked the one bearing the purple markings.

“The best I have felt in a while. Now, if only I could take to the skies again.”

“Tell me about it,” griped the blue marked twin. “Being grounded sucks.”

“We’ve been grounded for the past month due to some major repairs,” the other explained. “So we completely understand. By the way, my name’s Golf and that’s Indy.”

“The three of you will be grounded until we are sure that you are completely healed,” Foxtrot said as he set a cube of energon down in front of Starscream.

“But my t-cog.”

“Has been replaced,” Foxtrot assured him as he sat down across from him. “It has just been deactivated for the time being.”

Starscream stared down at the cube for a long moment. “Why did you do all this for me?”

“Well, part of it was us taking responsibility for letting MECH take your t-cog in the first place,” the medic explained. “That was our fault. The rest of it was the fact that we just can’t turn a blind optic on a wounded mech. We’ve all been in need of saving so we are willing to extend a helping servo.”

“But you should be careful too,” Indy warned. “That servo hides a blaster.”

“If you try to repay our kindness with harm,” added Golf, “don’t be surprised when we retaliate.”

“Checkmate!” Indy suddenly exclaimed after moving his queen.


“Have you ever played this, Starscream?” asked Foxtrot, gesturing to the board.

“No. Is it an earth game?”

“Yeah. It’s a two player strategy game called Chess,” said Indy.

In the middle of the twins explaining the rules of the game to the seeker, an alarm sounded. Foxtrot was up and out the door before Starscream could even ask what was going on.


Indy sighed. “Someone’s been badly hurt... Again.”

Chapter End Notes

There is a side chapter about Liliy and Optimus going to visit the Rescue Bots that fits between this chapter and the next one but I posted it separately. It can be found in part 2 of the Neutrals series. This fic is part 1.
Violence warning... aside from the fighting robots, Liliy kills humans. Decapitations and dismemberment do occur. It isn't very graphic but just had to let you know it's there.

Optimus rolled to a stop once he reached the main room of the base. Liliy hopped off his back, cradling an energon crystal.

“Thanks for taking me along, Optimus. I really had fun…” She trailed off as she noticed the other Autobots gathering and, for some reason, on guard. “...Is something wrong?” she asked them.

“Liliy, has Optimus been with you all evening?” Arcee asked. She was sporting a few more paint scratches than usual.

Optimus transformed and shared a confused look with Liliy.

“Yeah. We’ve been together all weekend.” Liliy lifted the crystal slightly. “We were energon scouting in Maine. We just got back.”

“In Maine? Oh, you went there,” Ratchet said.

“Yeah.” Liliy looked over at Agent Fowler and noticed that he too was on guard. “Are you guys gonna tell us what happened? Why are you so suspicious of Optimus?”

“Because I was attacked out on the open highway tonight. By a big rig that bore a striking resemblance to you.” Fowler locked eyes with Optimus.

“And whoever it was ran me over too,” added Arcee.

“Ran you over?” repeated Liliy.

“That’s what it feels like anyway.” Her servo brushed over one of the new scratches on her other arm. "Have you ever been hit by a truck?"

“No, but I can only assume it might feel similar to getting punted across the room by a mech the size of Megatron.” At their surprised looks, she added, “It was an accident that was entirely my fault but the said mech has been very cautious around me ever since.”

“That sounds like a story I would love to hear,” commented Ratchet.

“I’m sure you would. Some other time though. I need to go home for a bit. Let me know if you find anything about the mysterious attacker, alright?” And she disappeared into the portal that had opened next to her.

The vehicle coming toward Julian looked oddly familiar. As it drew closer, she recognized the
color scheme and make of the oncoming vehicle, though the colors were darker than she remembered and paintjob was faded and covered in scratches. But with the presence of the Autobot insignia on the truck’s grill, she was fairly certain that it was Optimus Prime’s alt, so she scanned for a spark.

There wasn’t one.

She scanned for a human driver.

...None.

She scanned for an energy signature.

Energon.

Julian slammed on her brakes and pulled over to the side of the road. The big rig passed by the charcoal pickup truck, undeterred. She watched the truck go down the road a little ways and then slow down to turn onto another road. According to the highway sign at the intersection, the road led to a military base.

Something wasn’t right. How could it run on energon and not have a spark? Unless it was an undead…? But undead ran on dark energon as far as she knew. And can’t transform into vehicle mode. Her scans registered regular energon. And as far as she knew, no Cybertronian could hide their spark signal from the SDS. Not even the Madam who could mask herself to appear human on medical scans. So that meant it had to be sparkless. Leech and the Leecher armor were sparkless but even Leech gave off a separate signal and the armor couldn’t move without a pilot. So the truck being sparkless made no sense, unless…

Her large tires spun in the dirt as she slammed the accelerator to the floor. She pulled a U-turn as she got back onto the road and went after the semi-truck.

...Unless it wasn't Cybertronian to begin with.

Julian wanted to confirm her suspicions before she called for backup. The gate of the base was busted in like the truck had plowed right thru it. But the humans had not abandoned it. In fact, there were more guards there now. She stopped well away from the gate. What to do? She needed to get closer but she didn’t want to scare the humans. She backtracked a bit and went off road to circle around the base. Transforming, she jumped the fence and hid behind one of the large hangars. She peeked around it to assess the situation.

The humans had the truck surrounded. They demanded the driver exit the vehicle or they would open fire. Two of the humans ran up the driver’s door and opened it, pointing their guns inside. They found no one inside and after a second, the door slammed shut on its own.

Julian knew for sure now that the truck was no Cybertronian. The transformation sequence was all wrong. It even sounded wrong. But sure enough, the transformed bot looked like Optimus Prime, albeit with a darker, undead look about him and glowing, yellow optics.

“I am Optimus Prime,” it said in an exact copy of Prime’s voice. “Leader of the Autobots. And bring you this message.” It transformed a servo into blaster and pointed it at the humans. The biolights glowed yellow as the blaster charged.

Julian didn’t even stop to think as she activated her own blaster. A single shot knocked the pseudo-Prime’s blaster aside and its shot missed the humans. It looked up in time to see her plow into it. The humans scattered as it easily shook her off and she fell over onto one of the jeeps.
“Autobot reinforcements already?” it asked still with Prime’s voice.

“I’m not an Autobot,” she growled as she got to her pedes.

“A Decepticon then?” It took a fighting stance.

“Not anymore.” She charged forward again.

“Fowler,” Agent Fowler answered his cell phone after it rang. He turned and paced away as he listened to the caller. “What?! That’s not possible! I can tell you sure as there are fifty stars on my star-spangled shorts,” he turned back to look at Optimus, “it isn’t him!” He paused as the caller said something else. “Understood.” He hung up the phone. “Alden Military Base is under attack,” Fowler informed everyone in the room. “By Optimus Prime.”

“The truck?” Jack asked.

“The bot!” Fowler answered. “And apparently there is another bot there already fighting him.”

Julian silently thanked Liliy for teaching her about human fighting techniques and how to fight bots bigger than her or else she would have already lost. Pseudo-Prime was not moving how a Cybertronian normally would. It was also bigger and stronger than her but she was faster. Even then, it was not going well for her as she was flung into a helicopter that sat nearby. As she struggled to get up, the helicopter beside it exploded.

Pseudo-Prime didn’t even wait to see if she survived before it turned to attack the humans again. Julian stumbled away from the wreckage and fell to her knees, spots of her charcoal armor blackened and smoldering. Warnings flashed across her HUD about injuries from shrapnel and burns.

“It’s going to take more than that to stop me,” she grimaced as she got to her pedes.

Julian rammed into the bot, knocking it over. It rolled over and pinned her to the ground. She tried to shoot it but its right servo changed into a blade and stabbed her right thru the t-cog before the transformation was complete. Her servo was a useless, half transformed mess but her main concern was the blade still piercing her chassis.

“Not an Autobot. Not a Decepticon,” it mused still with Prime’s voice. “Tell me more about yourself.”

“Get fragged!” she snarled behind her mask.

“You know this chassis is an exact copy of the original. All the same in size, strength, and speed. But you know the best part? It doesn’t feel pain!” It twisted the blade in the wound.

Julian’s pained scream turned to static when it jerked the blade free from her chassis, causing even more damage. Pseudo-Prime got back to its pedes and swung its blade sharply to rid it of energon before it switched to a blaster.

“I’ll deal with you after I finish off this base.”

Julian didn’t respond. All she had the strength to do was send an emergency request back to base
before she slipped into stasis.

Both ground bridges opened at the same time. Fortunately, they were far enough apart that they didn’t disrupt each other. However when pseudo-Prime saw the new arrivals, it immediately transformed back to vehicle mode and fled. The CRC mechs simply picked up Julian and disappeared back into their ground bridge, while the Autobots had to retreat due to military reinforcements arriving to attack them.

Liliy was actually still in the receiving room talking to Alfa and Leecher when the Critical Alarm went off for Julian. Alfa wasted no time bringing up her coordinates and opening a bridge. He and Leecher ran thru to get her. Foxtrot arrived in the receiving room just as they were bringing her back.

“What happened? What did you see?” Liliy asked Alfa after he transferred Julian into Foxtrot’s care.

“It was a human military base that looked like it was under attack. The Autobots were there too but, for some reason, there were two Optimus Primes.”

“Two Primes?” Liliy happened to glance out into the main hall and saw Starscream with the twins coming out of the rec room. “Echo is on Comm duty today, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She zipped up to his shoulder. “Let’s go to the Comm center.”

Having given orders to locate MECH, Liliy returned to Omega One to find out the situation there. Fowler was on the phone with his superior when she arrived.

“No, General Bryce. Optimus Prime did not attack our boys. … Because I was with Prime when I received the alert. … Yes, sir. The Autobots were at your base, but only in response to the initial attack. … But, sir, I- … Yes, sir. I understand.” Fowler hung up his phone and pocketed it.

“So what’s the damage?” asked Jack.

“All military personnel are under strict orders to destroy any and all bots on sight,” Fowler informed them.

“Are you kidding?” gasped Jack.

“But they’re innocent,” exclaimed Raf.

“Optimus was framed,” insisted Miko.

“Though unfortunate, the military order changes nothing,” said Optimus. “Our imposter poses a grave threat to humanity.”

“A 30 foot tall, transforming imposter,” corrected Fowler.

“Not just humanity. You know one of mine was there too, right?” Liliy asked.

“We heard. And we saw your ground bridge and your mechs retreating. What happened?” Optimus
wanted to know.

“Julian tried to protect the humans from your imposter,” Liliy answered, “which I can only assume is MECH created, and nearly got herself killed.”

“So they’ve actually done,” said Ratchet. “Those butchers managed to crack the code.”

“It seems they have,” replied Optimus.

“MECH abducted Breakdown and by all indications deconstructed him from cranial chamber to heel strut,” Ratchet explained to everyone.

“He was in a rather sorry state,” Liliy added, “but they managed to not spill any of his energon.”

“We also know that more recently they obtained Starscream’s t-cog,” said Optimus.

“Hey, it’s his own damn fault for allying with them in the first place. But beside that, whose fault is it that they were even able obtain scans of you, Optimus?” asked Liliy.

“If it hadn’t been Optimus, it would’ve been one of your mechs that they copied,” replied Ratchet.

“You’re just jealous because they copied Optimus since he is such a powerful mech,” commented Miko.

“Actually we should be glad they never got to see Kilo,” said Liliy.

“Why? How big is Kilo?” asked Raf.

“Well, you see how tall Arcee is compared to Optimus?” Liliy gestured to the blue femme who was only half the height of the Prime. Raf nodded. “Yeah, that’s about how Optimus compares to Kilo.”

The children stared at her in shock.

Arcee made a noise like she was clearing her throat. “So anyway, MECH took Starscream’s t-cog and installed it in a knockoff of Optimus…?”

“Which in turn scanned an appropriate vehicle form,” said Ratchet.

“Fill the tank with energon,” added Jack.

“And say hello to ‘Nemesis Prime’!” exclaimed Miko.

“I guess that’s a little better than pseudo-Prime,” muttered Liliy.

“So where do we start?” asked Fowler. “MECH’s base could be anywhere.”

“Not necessarily,” answered Optimus. “While they may have learned much of our biology—”

“They haven’t necessarily absorbed our technology,” finished Ratchet. “Without access to a ground bridge, Nemesis Prime would rely solely on its vehicle-mode for transportation.”

“Chances are the MECH base is within driving distance of both incidents,” said Arcee.

“What are we waiting for? Let’s get out there and mash MECH’s little science project.” Fowler smashed his fist into his palm.
“Agent Fowler, I do not think it advisable to put yourself in harm’s way of MECH’s robot again,” said Optimus.

“Well, I’m not sure it’s advisable for Bots to be running recon with the military out there gunning for you,” Fowler retorted, crossing his arms and glaring at Prime.

“There’s no need to worry, Agent Fowler,” Liliy interrupted, looking up from reading a message on her phone. “Neither you, nor the Autobots need to leave the base. The CRC’ll handle this.”

“But, Liliy-”

“Don’t even start, Optimus,” Liliy snapped. “MECH is going to pay for what they did to Julian! For what they did to Bumblebee!” She pointed at the Autobot scout. “And for what they did to Breakdown! And if you Autobots or any affiliated humans,” she glanced at Fowler, “get in our way, we cannot guarantee your safety!”

“You intend to kill Silas?” asked Optimus. His tone was as hard as his glare.

“I told you not to start, Optimus. There is nothing you can say that will change my mind,” Liliy insisted as a ground bridge opened behind her. “Agent Fowler, I’ll contact you when it’s done, so you can get someone for clean up.”

Fowler sighed. “Very well. But try not to make a very big mess, alright?”

“As you wish,” she replied before she and the portal disappeared.

“Is it really alright, Agent Fowler?” asked Optimus, turning his gaze to the human.

“To tell you the truth, Prime, I was told that there were some casualties from the attack on the base. Because of that, I would love to take down Silas myself. No one attacks our boys and gets away with it. If the Pentagon knew that it was MECH behind the attack, they would hunting them down too. Letting Liliy do it saves us some trouble.”

“But didn’t you just recently accuse Liliy of working with MECH?” Bulkhead pointed out.

“I think Liliy’s ‘outburst’ at that accusation would have been enough to convince Megatron,” said Arcee.

“Besides, the CRC saved me and Arcee from MECH,” added Jack.

“Aside from forgetting Starscream, the CRC has always been saving us and the Cons from MECH,” beeped Bumblebee. “We should let Liliy finish this.”

“Are you sure this is the place?” Leecher asked as they drove through the gate of the abandoned industrial plant.

{Affirmative. I have confirmed it myself with a flyover.} answered Echo. {There is a human presence there and it is within driving distance of both incidents.}

“Is Kilo ready to go?”

{Ready and waiting, commander.}

“Then let’s get this over with.” Leecher transformed and moved deeper into the plant on ped.
It wasn’t long before Leecher detected another energon signature close by. Nemesis Prime attempted to attack them from behind but they dodged out of the way and spun to face it.

“So you have finally come out, Nemesis Prime. Or should we just call you Silas?”

“I’m honored that you remembered my name,” it replied, this time with Silas’ voice rather than Prime’s. “Won’t you give me yours that I know what to call your replica when I build it?”

“Show that organic face of yours and we might.”

“Tell you what. If you can beat my robot chassis, I will personally come out there and greet you.”

“Regardless of whether we beat your toy or not, we will greet you. Besides, we won’t be fighting you. That’s what he is for.”

Kilo appeared behind Leecher. His visor flicked from red to orange as he gazed down at Nemesis Prime who stared up at him.

“Some of you are capable of moving at hyper speed? I must have that tech.”

“Have a bout with this big guy and we might consider it,” Leecher said as they stepped out of the way.

Silas could only sit in his command chair and watch helplessly as a myriad of errors popped up across monitor before him while the giant mech outside tore his robot limb from limb. The video went blank when the mech’s servo closed over the robot’s helm, probably crushing it.

“Sir, what should we do?” asked one of his men.

“So the big guy’s finished already, huh?” Leecher’s voice echoed in the tunnel that led to the outside. The matte black El Camino rolled into the room and stopped.

“You really did come to greet me,” Silas said, standing from the chair and facing them.

Several MECH agents gathered, most of them were carrying guns and aiming at Leecher. Silas signaled for them to hold fire.

“We came to get revenge on you for nearly killing one of our subordinates,” replied Leecher.

“You mean that gray robot from earlier? An excellent fighter, that one.”

“They all are. We trained them ourself.”

“And who exactly are you? You seem to be different from the others.”

“Would you like to see our true form?”

The driver door opened and Liliy stepped out in her human form. She wore Leech’s preferred outfit of a fitted tee, cargo pants, and combat boots, all black. But most importantly, she had both arms.

“A human?” gasped one of the men.

Even though he did not speak, there was recognition in Silas’ expression. He obviously remembered her from the attack on the warehouse.
“Only when we wish to be seen as such,” she answered.

“We?” repeated Silas.

Liliy transformed and brought out her staff as well. Leech hung off her left shoulder, tails writhing like snakes.

“We.” Liliy and Leech spoke in sync.

“You’re one of them ?!”

“But of course. And we are tired of you trying to plunder our tech.”

“Even if you stop me. Stop MECH. There will be others.”

One of the men off to the side got one of their specialized guns that fired electro-charges. He aimed at Liliy and was slowly squeezing the trigger.

“Oh, we know.” There was a slight shift in her stance. “And we’ll deal with them when the time comes.”

They never saw her move but Leech was suddenly holding that big gun with the man’s gloved hand still on the trigger. The end of the severed arm was burned black as if cut by something very hot, like a laser. The rest of the man lay on the floor where he had been standing but he was in two pieces.

The obvious fear that filled the room made Liliy smile.

“You know, one of the most interesting things I learned about your culture is that the scythe is often used to represent death.” A low hum filled the air when she activated her blade. “And Scythe just happens to be my designation.” Liliy swung her scythe and decapitated the nearest human. Then she vanished for their perception.

Silas could only stand there and watch as his men fell. And they fell at random. One in front. In the back. In the middle on the other side of the room. They tried to run. They really did. But they never made it very far. He just stood there until the floor was covered in dismembered corpses and the air reeked of burnt flesh.

“How did it come to this?” he asked.

Liliy stopped in front of him, her blade inactive. “Your first mistake was trying to steal the DNGS from Agent Fowler. Things just escalated from there.”

He smiled suddenly. “You and I are not much different, you know. Killing without hesitation to get what we want.”

“We are killing MECH to protect our fellow Cybertronians and there rest of mankind from your warmongering!”

“You keep telling yourself that, but in reality-”

“Oh, shut up.” She swung her staff, the blade reactivating.

Silas’ head hit the floor with a thud, but his body remained upright for a moment before it toppled over.
“You and I are nothing alike,” she told the corpse. “If anything, you were a Decepticon in human skin.”

“What should we do, Lil’?” asked Leech. “There might be more MECH agents out there. The organization could come back.”

“We’ll keep an audial to the ground this time. If they show up again, we’ll deal with them. But for now, the biggest threat was Silas.” She accessed her comm and dialed Agent Fowler.

{Fowler.}

“It’s done.”

{Silas is dead?}

“Along with all the MECH agents that were here with him.”

{I have a feeling my superiors are not going to happy about this.}

“Sending you the coordinates. Please take care of the rest.”

{Sure…} The was a pause. {Lily?}

“Hm?”

{Are you alright?}

“I’ve been worse.”

{That doesn’t answer my question.}

“See you when you get here.” And hung up on him.

When Agent Fowler arrived with the cleanup crew, Liliy was waiting for him at the front gate. However, he had no idea it was her. She appeared to be a man in his late forties, maybe with some Asian descent. Dressed in a black suit and tie typical of some government agents, she had black hair and dark rimmed glasses. And her eyes… while the right one was her usual reddish brown, the left was more orange in color.

“Special Agent Fowler?” she asked in Leech’s voice as she pushed off the matte black El Camino to greet him. “Special Agent Lin Lee.” She flashed a badge at him.

“What are you doing here?”

“Miss Scythe called and said you might need some help. She already informed me of the situation.”

“Is she here still?”

She stepped closer and lowered her voice. “Not as you normally perceive her but yes.”

He raised an eyebrow at her.

“Aliases don’t have to be just names, Agent Fowler.”
Fowler's brows furrowed. "Impersonating a government officer is a crime you know."

"I'm not impersonating anything. Lin Lee is a legit agent. He's just been around a lot longer than humanly possible."

He glared at her for a moment longer before relenting. "Fine. But stay out of trouble."

“I’ll do my best.”

Agent Fowler had been a soldier and had seen a lot already, so he thought he was prepared for anything his current job could throw at him. Unfortunately, that was not the case when he entered the building and saw the carnage Liliy left behind. She, as Agent Lee, had elected to stay outside and oversee the collection of Silas’ robot.

That had been a bit disturbing as well. Seeing a robot that looked like Optimus, laying in a bunch of pieces with energon leaking everywhere. That was a state he never wanted to see any of the Bots in. Especially the way helm looked like it had been crushed like a tin can.

Seeing firsthand how dangerous the Cybertronian Rebel Corps could be, he had to remind himself that they weren’t Autobots. From what he had heard, all of them were former Decepticons, with the exception of Liliy and her SIC. However, looking around at the corpses that littered the floor, he realized that factions didn’t mean much if all Cybertronians wanted to hurt humans. Even Prime and his little team could make a giant mess if they really wanted to. But he was glad that they did not. And that Liliy, for the most part, did not. He would have to talk to her about her team though.

Sighing, he pushed aside that thought for later as he watched the cleanup crew bag Silas’ headless body. Right now there was a lot of work to do.
It took a several days to get things sorted. Fowler managed to get Liliy--Agent Lee, he reminded himself for the umpteenth time--temporary placement to his division, Unit E. She was a great help at gathering all the pieces of Nemesis Prime and at least part way reassembling it. Getting it to work again was impossible with the crushed helm. Fowler highly suspected that was on purpose.

When someone suggested that they might be able to rebuild the robot, Liliy shot it down, saying that they should leave the project alone until they were sure MECH was gone for good. It would be very bad if they found out and tried to steal the tech back.

Finally, General Bryce called Fowler and Liliy up to his office for a meeting.

“Special Agent Fowler, Special Agent Lee, please come in,” the general said, gesturing to the two chairs in front of his desk.

There was another soldier in the room holding a video camera and, going by the indicator light, it was recording.

“What’s Private Daily doing here with that camera?” Fowler asked as he entered. Liliy followed and shut the door.

“He will be making a record of today’s debriefing,” Bryce answered as he stood up. He stepped around his desk and offered a hand to Liliy. “Agent Lee, we finally meet. I have heard a lot about you. Thank you for your help so far.”

General Bryce was shorter than both Liliy and Fowler. His close cut, brown hair was starting to gray around the edges and a heavy moustache covered his upper lip. It seemed he liked to be comfortable like Fowler, wearing the jacket of his uniform open and his tie loose under his collar. Liliy felt a little 'overdressed' with her suit jacket properly buttoned and her tie tight under her collar, but she shook his hand anyway.

“It was not a problem, General.”

“You know, your technological know-how could be a great asset to Unit E. If you ever think of switching agencies, we would like to have you.”

“Thank you for the invitation, sir. I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Very good.” General Bryce returned to his seat. Fowler and Liliy sat down as well. “Now then, as we get started, Bill, I need to inform you that our higher-ups are on the warpath.”

“They want answers regarding recent events,” replied Fowler.

“Perhaps we should begin with the demise of Optimus Prime,” Bryce said, utterly serious.

Liliy, for her part, kept her reaction a quiet, but amused snort. Fowler shot her a stern glare before answering.

“I thought we straightened all this out. Prime is alive and well.”

“That’s difficult for our superiors to accept. Without the benefit of seeing Optimus and the alleged imposter.”
“Side by side?” asked Fowler.

“Weren’t there witnesses at the attack on Alden Military Base?” Liliy wanted to know. “As I understand it, Optimus and the imposter were there at the same time. Or is it the same here? The higher-ups don’t listen to their lower ranked subordinates.”

“I’m not sure I want to know who you are comparing us to but-” Fowler looked to Bryce for an answer. “Were there witness statements taken?”

“Probably but it seems they were not added to the official report.”

“Of course not.” Fowler sighed. “Well, let’s consider a few of the positives. We now possess greater intel regarding MECH.” He opened one of the file folders that he had brought with him. It contained a list of all the deceased from incident. He handed it over to the general. “While their leader, Silas, was ex-special tactics, a one Colonel Leland Bishop, several of their other members were still active military, which is why they kept their faces covered. I would urge a thorough investigation. Especially since we don’t know if there are more MECH agents out there. And leave bigger threats to metal hands more capable than our own.”

Bryce glanced over the list and then set it aside. “Because you’ve been allowed to operate at such deeply classified levels, Agent Fowler, perhaps you could provide some background.”

“Ah, I think Agent Lee here would be better suited for that.”

Bryce raised a curious eyebrow but nodded for Lily to go ahead.

“The alien race that has been nicknamed ‘Transformers’ for their ability to transform as a way to disguise themselves,” Lily said, already used to giving this speech, “are actually autonomous robotic organisms from the planet Cybertron. They’ve been fighting a war for a long time. There were some other issues but mostly it was over their world’s supply of energon, the fuel and life blood of all Cybertronians. As the war drew on and got worse, both sides began hiding their energon off world. That is the reason energon deposits exist on Earth. But where energon went, war followed. Cybertronians have actually been on this planet for far longer than humans realize.”

“And the battles over energon, and its dark counterpart,” added Fowler, “continue to this day.”

“And you know this for certain?” asked Bryce.

“There are too many vehicon casualties to suggest otherwise,” said Lily, glancing off to the side as if she hadn’t meant to speak aloud.

“Vehicon? What’s that?” asked Bryce.

“Decepticon troops.”

“I’ve seen more than enough to make me a believer,” Fowler added. “But I also rely upon field reports from Team Prime which I in turn share with you.”

“Everything goes into those field reports?” asked Lily, looking to Fowler.

“I’m sure some minor details get left out from time to time,” he admitted.

“Let’s skip ahead to the history of your involvement, Agent Fowler,” said Bryce.

“Well, as you know, I wasn’t overjoyed with what I assumed was going to be a bot-sitting
assignment,” Fowler said. “But its occupational hazards turned out to be surprisingly severe. And by now the Bots have saved my bacon more times than I can count. ‘Course, I’ve returned the favor a time or two. Sometimes exercising my authority or relying upon quick thinking. But even I have made a few mistakes.”

“Have you had any contact with the Autobots yet, Agent Lee?” asked Bryce.

“Not as of yet. But I was hoping that Agent Fowler would be able to introduce me to them after this is over.” She looked at Fowler again.

“We’ll see,” he huffed.

“If you would, Agent Fowler, provide a roll call,” Bryce asked.

“So we’ll know who’s who in the event another Bot snaps?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, there’s…” Fowler started with Bulkhead and listed off the current members of Team Prime, aside from Optimus, and Wheeljack since he was technically rogue, giving their roles and a little bit about each Bot. He finished off with telling about how Bumblebee lost his voice box to Megatron.

“So, the Autobots aren’t quite the indestructible the war machines we’d hoped.”

“Don’t misunderstand, General,” Lily jumped in. “Cybertronians can take serious punishment.”

“But they do have their vulnerabilities,” added Fowler. “We learned that the hard way, when we lost Cliffjumper.”

“And, for the record, Cliffjumper was the last Autobot casualty?”

“I told you the lifeless mech you have in storage isn’t Prime!” Fowler insisted, gesturing in the general direction of said robot. "It's a knock off!”

“I’m pretty sure that was mentioned in the report. And since Silas and the control tech were also recovered, I’m confused about what the problem is here,” Lily wondered.

“The higher-ups are still skeptical,” Bryce said. “Let us proceed. Agent Fowler, your last debriefing indicated that Optimus Prime had joined the Decepticons.”

“Not willfully!” Fowler stood up, hoping to get his point across better. "Prime had amnesia! I know I was clear on that.”

“But you can see where outside observers can connect the dots to the recent attack on our base.”

Lily facepalmed. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Bill, the higher-ups have grown nervous that we’ve been placing our trust in beings who could so easily inflict harm if they choose to turn on us,” said Bryce, leaning back in his chair.

Fowler just stood there for a moment, realizing he himself had had those same thoughts after seeing what the CRC did to MECH.

"The Autobots are not the ones you should be worried about," Lily pointed out grimly, shaking Fowler from his stupor.
“General Bryce, Prime is no loose cannon!” Fowler insisted. “The Bots may be big but they watch where they step. Heck, even the kids-“

“Kids?!” interrupted Bryce.

“Oh, so you left out those little details huh?” asked Liliy.

"Uh, ha. 'Kids’…” Fowler nervously took his seat again. "That's what we call our..." He searched for the right words. "In-house support team."

“I wasn’t aware that you were utilizing any of our resources other than yourself,” said Bryce.

“They’re… not enlisted,” admitted Fowler.

“You’ve involved civilians in a classified operation?”

“Highly accomplished civilians, who contribute specialized expertise in…” Fowler glanced at Liliy to find her watching him with an amused smirk. “Computer science, medicine, and communications. Among other things.”

“So, they know how to take orders?” Bryce wanted to know.

“You, could, say that…” Fowler hedged, knowing that Liliy was still smirking at him. He straightened up. “But what they lack in military discipline, they more than make up for with outside-the-box problem solving. Their courage is to be admired. And they’ve proven time and again, that they’re willing to put their lives on the line for their country and their planet.”

That made Liliy drop her smirk.

“So, your civilians have made enemy contact,” said Bryce.

“They’ve pretty much seen it all,” admitted Fowler. “But rest assured, the safety of these humans—of all humans—remains the primary concern of the Autobots. And our colleagues wouldn’t have it any other way. They’ve forged meaningful bonds with the Bots. And they provide valuable assistance when I’m otherwise engaged in the field. However, their involvement was never intended to be anything other than humanitarian. To provide the Autobots with the means of better understanding life on our planet.

“Sadly, though,” Fowler continued, changing the subject, “we haven’t begun to take full advantage of their science. I mean, I can pilot my VTOL without ever having to wear a flight suit.”

“What keeps your organs from exploding?” asked Bryce.

“A modification Ratchet performed on the cabin pressure regulator,” explained Fowler. “I like to be comfortable.”

“We may be getting off track,” said Bryce. “Please address why we haven’t yet been served Megatron’s steel head on a silver platter.”

“It’s harder than you think,” Liliy said with some feeling behind it.

Fowler quickly took over explaining, hoping the General didn’t pick up on that. “The leader of the Decepticons has nine lives. Plain and simple. And it’s not like we haven’t tried. However, the sick part is, the moment we might’ve pulled it off, we needed him. Megatron actually helped us save humanity.”
“Elaborate.”

“We found ourselves facing an even bigger threat than MECH or the Decepticons,” said Fowler. “Literally, an enemy within—”

“Which you don’t need to elaborate any further on, Agent Fowler,” Liliy interrupted. “In my experience, the military gets a little jumpy when you start talking about ancient beings and mystical powers. Let’s just say that the threat was neutralized, alright?”

Bryce nodded, understanding. “And Megatron proved to be an ally?”

“The circumstances were unique,” continued Fowler. “Oddly, the Con most likely to be of service is Starscream. Only by default, because he may despise his team more than he despises ours. But even after Megatron attempted to terminate him, Starscream still tried to win his master’s favor. Starscream’s insecurity is what makes him less predictable than Megatron, and in some ways even more dangerous. He really needs to figure out if it’s Megatron’s job he wants or Megatron’s approval.”

“I must in turn ask why successful termination of Starscream has not been achieved.”

“Air superiority continues to provide the Cons with the upper hand,” Fowler replied, “though we’ve managed to inflict the occasional setback. But the fact remains, Starscream has supplied valuable intel since he went rogue. Not to worry, the Bots know better than to trust him implicitly. Fortunately for us, despite his strategic brilliance, Starscream is his own worst enemy. However, we are unsure of his current state at this time.”

“He is currently a guest of the CRC,” supplied Liliy. “But he is not the only one who has taken flight from Megatron. Airachnid is on the loose again.”

“The spider?” asked Bryce.

“If she is out again, it could be trouble,” said Fowler. “Airachnid is sadistic as they come. She and Arcee have quite a history. I can’t help but feel the next time they lock horns, only one’s gonna walk away.”

“Unless Megatron gets to Airachnid first,” Liliy pointed out.

“So, the infighting among the Decepticon ranks continues?” Bryce asked.

“And then some,” answered Fowler. “Megatron can’t seem to keep his inner circle holding hands.”

“And you don’t think we could take advantage of the chaos, motivate a Decepticon to join our cause?”

“I don’t know about joining your cause,” replied Liliy, “but it might be possible to persuade one of them to at least leave the Decepticons.”

“What about Dreadwing?” Fowler asked, looking at Liliy. “Optimus seems to respect him.”

Liliy shot him a meaningful glance. “Not since he found out that the Autobots killed his twin, Skyquake.”

“Twin? I didn’t think the bots had siblings,” said Fowler.

“There is the rare occurrence of twins among Cybertronians,” Liliy explained. “Usually split-
spark. Like siamese twins that share a heart but are separated at birth. Two parts of the same whole, if you will. However, if Dreadwing finds out about the dark energon incident, there might be something you can work with. Especially if Starscream somehow manages to worm his way back into Megatron’s favor.”

“Oh, right. About that, whatever happened to zombie Skyquake? Do you know?” Fowler asked.

“I was informed that he is resting in peace again.”

Bryce cleared his throat to regain their attention. “Ahem. Back to the point. If Optimus believes that even a Decepticon holds the potential for change, why couldn’t the reverse be true? No one truly knows what went on behind the Decepticon curtain while Optimus was off the grid. Not you. Not the Autobots—”

“That’s not entirely true, General Bryce,” corrected Liliy. “While Miss Scythe was disinclined to share the finer details, she assured me that Optimus was constantly being deceived by Megatron because of his amnesia but eventually he saw thru the lies and wished to once again help the Autobots.”

“And how do we know Miss Scythe wasn’t actually working with the Decepticons?”

The chair creaked as Liliy leaned forward. “Let me ask you a question, General Bryce. If the Decepticons came along and killed everyone you ever knew and cared about, would you consider joining them?”

“No. I would not.”

“Then you share something with Miss Scythe,” she said, leaning back again.

“For the record, Miss Scythe is not an Autobot,” said Bryce.

“Correct,” replied Fowler. “Liliy Scythe is a Canadian citizen that the Autobots took under their protection after they saved her from a Decepticon attack.”

“One of your in-house support team?”

“Yes. But as it turns out, there was more to her than meets the eye. After Optimus regained his memories, he identified her as the Madam of the CRC.”

“CRC?”

“The Cybertronian Rebel Corps,” Liliy said. “A group of Neutrals who until recently have been watching from the sidelines. For the most part, they want to protect Earth from the Decepticons but they are not above killing humans, unlike the Autobots. It was Miss Scythe who took out Silas after all.”

“So, if we decided to move against the CRC...” Bryce left the question hanging.

“Don’t press your luck, General Bryce,” Liliy warned. “As long as you leave them alone, they won’t cause you any trouble. That was something Silas learned too late.”

“If we asked them to hand over Starscream, would they do it?”

“No. Even if he is an annoying bastard, they won’t do it,” replied Liliy. “Something about how few Cybertronians are left or something like that.”
“That’s pretty vague,” said Fowler.

“I know, but they weren’t too inclined to share either.”

“Hmh.”

“So…” said Bryce. “To conclude…”

“Optimus Prime is alive and firmly on our side,” Fowler replied. “The Autobots aren’t going to turn on us. The threat of MECH and Silas has been neutralized-”

“And the CRC is willing to lend a hand in protecting humans,” finished Liliy, “as long as you don’t threaten their existence. Is that enough for you to make a case to the higher-ups? Or should we call Optimus over? He is waiting out in the parking lot, after all.”

"Optimus Prime is here?" Bryce sounded surprised as he turned a questioning gaze on Fowler.

Fowler nervously rubbed the back of his head. "Ha, well. Um..."

Liliy got up and went to the window. She opened the blinds and looked out. Optimus was sitting in the parking lot closest to the building.

“Agent Fowler, may I borrow your phone?”

Fowler pulled out his phone and handed it over to her. “Prime is #2 on my speed dial.”

“Thanks.” She dialed Prime and looked out the window again. “Optimus Prime. The building directly in front of you. A window, three stories up, there is a man waving at you. See him?” She paused and waved until he answered. “Great. Now I know for a fact your holo-emitter just got fixed. Would you mind projecting into the room?”

It took a couple seconds but a man finally appeared in the room. The general and Private Daily freaked out a bit and even Fowler was surprised. The man was about the same height as Liliy but broader in the shoulders. He looked older, with touches of gray in his dark hair. Wore a red flannel and blue jeans. He looked around the room before focusing on Liliy.

“Do I know you?” he asked, lifting an eyebrow.

“No. We haven’t met yet. I’m Special Agent Lin Lee. A friend of Miss Scythe’s.”

“I see. And, Agent Lee, what did you need me to come up here for?”

“General Bryce here,” she said with a gesture in the general’s direction, “just needed to confirm the state of your health and welfare.”

Prime’s hologram flickered a bit as he turned to face the general, but the gaze of his energon blue eyes was still piercing. “I am fine, General Bryce. How are you?”

“I’m well, uh, soldier,” replied Bryce, still a bit surprised.

“Optimus, since when could you…” Fowler couldn’t quite find the words. “I mean, what is this?” He gestured to the holoform.

“Most of us can produce a holographic driver like Arcee does. We just tend not. Mine was actually broken up until Liliy fixed it while we were in Maine.”
“So, General, is everything in order now?” asked Liliy.

“Uh… Yes. I believe I have everything I need to make a persuasive case that Optimus Prime is alive and well. And firmly on our side.”

Fowler stood at attention and saluted. “We appreciate your support, sir.”

Something beeped and then Private Daily finally lowered the camera. “The battery died.”

“That’s alright, Private. Just leave the camera on my desk and you’re dismissed.”

“Yes, sir.” He set the camera on the general’s desk and walked out.

“Prime, thanks,” said Fowler. "You can leave now too."

"As you wish, Agent Fowler." And the holoform vanished.

“Agent Lee, thank you again for your help. My invitation still stands.”

“It was my pleasure, General. And I will keep that in mind.” She headed for the door and pause with her hand on the knob. “I’ll see you outside, Agent Fowler.”

Fowler nodded and then turned to General Bryce once the door was shut again.

“I have a few concerns about that man,” said Bryce.

“About Agent Lee?”

“Yes.” Bryce opened a desk drawer and pulled out several file folders. He laid them in front of Fowler. “I had someone do a little research on him. They found multiple profiles for him from a few different agencies. And a couple of them date back to almost a hundred years ago. Same name, same description. Most of them are around the same age.”

Fowler flipped thru a couple of the files. There was a black and white photo in one of the oldest ones. The current Agent Lee looked exactly the same as the picture.

“You knew all this and you still invited him to become a part of Unit E?” asked Fowler, closing the folder and looking up at General Bryce.

“Well, he was a big help.” Bryce sighed. “This is off the record, Bill. What do you know about Special Agent Lin Lee? He seemed pretty familiar with the Decepticons.”

“And the CRC. And he knows more about the Autobots than he was letting on. General Bryce, that person you just met was one of the aliases of the Madam of the Cybertronian Rebel Corps. Her usual guise is that of a twenty-something female by the name of Lilily Scythe.” He slapped the other file folder he had brought with him down on the desk. “My advice: try to stay on her good side. And accusing her of working with the Decepticons is not how you do that. Trust me.”

Liliy was waiting for him just outside the building.

“Everything ok?”

“Everything is fine. Except for the fact that General Bryce investigated you and found out Agent Lee has been around for over a hundred years. It was off the record but I did tell him who you
“And?”

“He’ll let it slide this time. But try not to create any more casualties.”

“I make no promises.”

“If it’s not related to the Bots, I don’t need to know about it.”

“Deal.”

They stopped next to Optimus.

“So will you be heading back to your place?” Fowler asked Liliy. "Or were you going to join us at the base?"

“Well, that depends on if I am even allowed to go back to Omega One…” She looked pointedly at the big rig.

“Optimus, is Liliy banned from the base?”

“While I do disapprove of her methods,” Optimus replied just loud enough for them to hear, “Liliy is still allowed to join us.”

“Thank you, Optimus.” Her phone beeped and she pulled it out. “But it seems I am needed at home. If you'll excuse me.”

They watched her walk over to a matte black El Camino and get in. After she drove off, Agent Fowler climbed into Prime’s cab.

“Since I had to tell General Bryce,” Fowler said as Optimus left the base and turned onto the highway to Jasper, “I guess I’ll tell you too. If you didn’t notice, Agent Lin Lee is Liliy. One of her holographic aliases apparently.”

“That explains a few things,” mused Prime. "Except how she had two functioning arms.”

“Darnit. I knew there was something I was forgetting to ask her.”
The breakroom was abuzz with excited voices when Ucon entered. He weaved his way over to the energon dispenser and filled his cube.

“What’s going on?” he asked, sitting with some other Z squad members at their usual table.

“Oh, someone decided to give themselves a human name,” answered ZX-02 with a shrug before taking a sip from his cube.

“Human name?” Ucon pushed his mask up so it sat on top of his helm.

“Yeah,” replied ZX-03. “And now everybody seems to want one.”

“What about you, ZZ-05?” asked ZG-04. “Oh, there was one I heard that would fit you. It was Suzy.”

Ucon frowned. “Suzy is a girl’s name.”

“A what?” ZG-04 was confused.

“Nevermind,” Ucon sighed. He got up from his seat, cube in servo. “I’m going to go enjoy my break somewhere quiet.”

“Oh. Ok. Try not to be late for next shift though,” ZX-03 called after him.

Ucon waved as he went out the door.

“Was it just me or did he seem upset?” asked ZG-04.

“He was definitely upset,” ZX-02 confirmed. “That’s rare.”

“We should apologize to him later.”

“Yeah,” agreed ZX-03.

Ucon went up to the flight deck and sat down at the very edge. He stared at the passing clouds and took a sip of his energon.

“It’s dangerous to sit on the edge you know,” observed a voice behind him.

“I’m sure I would be fine even if I fell,” he retorted.

The mech came and sat down beside him. But Ucon didn’t bother to look at him because he knew he could not see him. As a precaution, Whiskey always remained in stealth mode whenever he visited. But, just knowing that he was there made Ucon feel better.

“So, what new with you?” Whiskey asked.

“Apparently, some of the vehicons decided they wanted human names.”
“That better than letters and numbers I suppose.”

"ZG-04 suggest the name Suzy for me."

“Pahahaha! Suzy?! That’s a girl’s name!”

“That’s what I said but apparently they don’t understand human gendering. Beside I already have a name. The one that the Madam gave me.”

“You didn’t tell them it, did you?”

“No way! I’m not that stupid.”

“Here. I brought this for you.” A canister of red energon appeared out of thin air and Whiskey set it down next to Ucon’s leg.

“Thanks.” Ucon picked up the canister and subspaced it. He pulled a computer chip out in the same motion and held it out to the air. “Here’s my monthly report.”

“I’ll get it to the Commander.” The chip disappeared from Ucon’s servo.

They sat in silence for a few moments while Ucon drank his ration.

“How is everyone?” he asked finally.

“How much time do you have?” Whiskey replied.

“Not enough.”

“Well then, I will tell you that the twins are up and about but still not cleared to fly. Julian is also improving and everyone else is doing well.”

“Julian? What happened to her?”

“Oh, right. The Decepticons probably didn’t hear about MECH building a knockoff of Prime.”

“No. But I bet they used the information they got from dissecting Breakdown, didn’t they?”

“Yep. Anyway, MECH attacked a human military base with it and Julian tried to stop them.”

“The knockoff was that good huh?”

“Good enough that when the Madam went after MECH, she took Kilo with her.”

“So we don’t have to worry about MECH anymore?”

“We don’t have to worry about Silas at least.”

“Is the Madam still hanging out with the Autobots?”

“Unfortunately, yes. They know who she is now though, thanks to Prime getting his memories back. I think she wants to help them end this war.”

“I want this war to end. Every time the vehicons have a run-in with the Autobots, most of them don’t come back.”

“I know. We try to save as many as we can but too often the damage…”
“At least you care. And you try! The Autobots… They don’t… Even the Decepticon officers... No one cares about the no-name no-ones! We’re just cannon fodder to them!”

“All of them?”

“Well, not Breakdown. He cares. Thanks for saving him again, by the way.”

“You’re welcome but it wasn’t me. Tango did it.”

Ucon actually glanced in Whiskey’s direction this time. “Tango? Really?”

“Yeah. Apparently he’s made quite an impression on your sleek medic and his buff assistant.”

Ucon sighed, his wings drooping ever-so-slightly.

“What’s wrong?”

“He found me.” Ucon looked over his shoulder.

Soundwave stood in the doorway to the ship. Laserbeak detached from his chest and transformed, flying across the deck to land near them.

Whiskey passed alarm thru their bond. [Soundwave is watching you?]

Ucon met him with hesitant reassurance. [He figured out that I have a connection to the Neutrals. But I don’t think he knows how deep it goes.]

[It would probably be best if he didn’t.]

Ucon drained the rest of his cube and stood up. [It's always nice to hear your voice even if I don't get to see you. Please visit again soon.]

[As you wish.] Whiskey bumped Ucon’s leg slightly.

Ucon smiled a little as he replaced his mask and turned to go back inside. Whiskey stood up and watched him approach Soundwave, ready to move if the silent mech tried anything. Soundwave let him pass without a word. Laserbeak launched into the air and flew around the deck once before returning to Soundwave. Soundwave stared out across the deck for a moment longer. Whiskey was almost afraid that the faceless mech might’ve noticed him. But then he turned and followed Ucon into the ship. Whiskey waited another minute or two without moving before he launched into the air himself, transformed, and flew away.

The ship lurched under the ZZ squad’s pedes.

“What was that?” asked ZZ-03, alarmed.

“I think we’re under attack,” ZZ-01 replied as the ship lurched again.

The second lurch was worse than the first and it knocked a couple of them on the afts.

“By who?” ZZ-04 wanted to know as he helped ZZ-02 back to her pedes. “The humans? The Autobots don’t have flight tech.”

Ucon stared off down the hall as he accessed the SDS to scan for spark signals. “Insecticons…”
“What?!” ZZ-02 shrieked, latching back onto ZZ-04 after he let her go.

“But Insecticons are Decepticons too,” ZZ-03 pointed out. “Why would they attack the Nemesis?”

“I don’t know.” Ucon shrugged. “Maybe someone else is controlling them.”

“But who could…?” ZZ-02 asked.

“Airachnid. She’s a type of Insecticon too,” answered ZZ-01.

ZZ-04 shuddered. “She’s still alive?”

“Commander Breakdown told me that she got away,” Ucon informed them.

“The combat squads are being called to the flight deck,” ZZ-01 said, listening to his comm. “We’ll probably have a big mess to clean up in a little while.”

Shortly after Megatron himself came out to fight the Insecticons, Airachnid’s control over them faded and they recognized him and surrendered. The ZZ squad was among those that were called up to the flight deck to help with clean up. There were several wounded in the hallway already when they arrived. Knock Out was there being assisted by Breakdown and the vehicons who worked in the medbay.

Two vehicons hurried in from the flight deck with an eradicon on a stretcher. There’s another eradicon beside them, holding the wounded femme’s servo and covered in energon not her own.

“Please!” she begged loudly as the vehicons set down the stretcher. “We need a medic over here!”

“We’re all kind of busy at the moment!” Knock Out snapped as he worked to stop the bleeding on some unfortunate vehicon who had gotten too close to an Insecticon’s claws. “Just wait your turn.”

“But she isn’t going to make it!” She was desperate.

“Then leave her be.” The reply was cold.

The eradicon collapsed to her knees beside her wounded partner. She was shaking with silent sobs as she stroked her helm.

Seeing all that, Ucon grabbed a spare medkit and went over to them.

“What’s her designation?” he asked as he knelt on the other side of the stretcher.

She jerked her helm and stared at him for a confused moment before answering. “GL-05. But she likes to be called Glados.”

There was a nasty gash in Glados’ chassis. The glass that covered her insignia was shattered and the wound barely missed her spark chamber but she was going to bleed out in no time if nothing was done.

Ucon popped open the medkit and quickly sorted out the items he would need. “What about you?”

“Uh, GL-10. I also go by Glen.”

“Glen. I like that one. Now. Hold on just a moment. I am going to help your…” He glanced down
and then back up at her. “Partner.”

Before she could start to ask what he meant, his visor flickered. It was still red but the shade was slightly darker than usual. Glen could no longer keep up with his movements. His arms and servos were a literal blur as he clamped severed lines and picked out bits of shrapnel. Hardly more than a minute passed before he leaned back on his pedes, his servos slick with energon and oil.

“She’s going to make it,” he said, his visor flicking back to normal. He wiped his servos off. “At least until Knock Out can get to her.”

Glen leaned over her. “She stopped bleeding?”

“Yes. But her levels are extremely low.” Ucon pulled a transfusion tube out of the medkit. “I can spare a couple liters—”

“Use mine!” Glen thrust her arm at him, energon line exposed. “She saved my life. I can return the favor, even a little bit.”

“As you wish.”

Ucon patched the line between the two femmes and drew as much energon from Glen as he dared. Which wasn’t much since she was a combat unit and they just seemed to burn thru energon faster. He switched the needles and gave some of his own energon to Glados as well.

“That should hold her for a bit,” Ucon said, putting the items back into the medkit and shutting it. “I have to join my squad now. But I’ll come back and check now her if I get the chance.”

Glen reached across and grabbed his servo. “I can’t thank you enough, uh, your des-?”

“ZZ-05.”

“Thank you, ZZ-05!”

Later, when Knock Out finally got around to examining GL-05, he was surprised at the level of expertise used to patch her up.

“Hey! Who worked on this one?” He wanted to know.

None of his assistants knew.


“Yes. There is someone on this ship as medically trained as I am and they’re not in my medbay. Someone find out who did this.”

“ZZ-05,” ZZ-01 said as he came forward to meet Ucon.

“Yes, ZZ-01?” Ucon picked up a hint of unease in his squad leader’s voice and that was never good.

“You are to report to AA-00 immediately.”
Ucon frowned. “Am I in trouble?”

“No... You're being transferred.”

It took a moment to sink in. “Transferred?! To where?”

“The combat squads. All the 5’s in the Z, Y, and X squads are.”

Ucon’s wings lowered. “No way. We've lost that many?”

“I'm afraid so. Especially after the Insecticon attack the other day.” He reached out and patted Ucon’s arm. “Now get going. And good luck to you.”

“ZZ-05, wait up,” ZS-03 called.

Ucon stopped and waited for her, ZX-02, ZG-04, and ZZ-04 to catch up him.

“Heard you’re getting transferred to the combat units with the rest of the Fives,” said ZX-02. “Do you know what squad yet?”

“No. I won’t know till the combat training results come out,” Ucon replied as the five of them entered the breakroom.

“Damn. I wish you weren’t going,” said ZG-04.

“Me either. I might try talking to AA-00. Maybe I can convince them to let me stay on the Nemesis.”

“Ha! Good luck with that, Five!” laughed ZZ-04.

“By the way, ZZ-05.” ZG-04’s wings twitched excitedly as they sat down at a table after getting their rations. “I found a name for myself.”

“Me too,” added ZS-03. “And we picked out one for ZX-02, too.” She tweaked the wheel on his shoulder.

ZX-02 pulled away from the femme vehicon and rolled his optics. “Whatever.”

“Oh?” Ucon was amused. “Let’s hear ‘em.”

“I’m Ziggy,” ZG-04 proclaimed proudly, wings high.

“I’m Suzumi,” said ZS-03. “And this is Zanax.”

Ucon raised an optic ridge. “Zanax? You guys made that one up.”

“So what? It suits him. And he answers to it, so it’s his name now.”

ZX-02--Zanax--was pointedly ignoring her as he sipped his energon.

“What about you, Four?” Ucon asked, turning to his squad mate who had been quiet so far. “Have you picked a name out yet?”

ZZ-04 stared at his cube, wings drooping a little. “No. Not yet. It’s hard finding names with two Zs.”
“You could substitute,” Ucon offered. “Take the name Susa or Susan and use Zs instead of Ss. Zuza or Zuzen, ya know?”

“Zuza…” ZZ-04 tested the name. “Zuza…” His wings lifted. “I actually kinda like that. Zuza. Thanks, Five!”

“What about you, ZZ-05?” Ziggy asked. “You rejected Suzy. Did you pick a name yet?”

“Well…” Ucon started, half-tempted to tell them his real name.

Thankfully, ZX-05 interrupted.

“ZZ-05!” he exclaimed, hurrying over to the table. “I finally found you! Come on! We have to go!”

“Wait, ZX-05. What are you talking about? Go where?” Ucon asked, confused.

“The results are out,” answered ZX-05. “You and I have been assigned to the DC squad!”

Suzumi let out a low whistle. “Whoa, DC! That’s like, top brass!”

“ZZ-05, I didn’t know you were good at fighting,” Zanax commented.

“I can hold my own if I need to, but I actually hate fighting,” Ucon replied.

“Anyway, we need to get going,” urged ZX-05. “They’re meeting up right now!”

“Alright. I’m coming.” Ucon drained his cube and got up from the table.

“Good luck, you guys!” The others called as the two eradicons left.

They ran into AA-00 on the way. They were by no means pleased with Ucon’s request to stay with his old squad. ZX-05 had to drag him away before he was able to work the silver eradicon into a true rage. Never a hard feat for Ucon, it seemed.

Finally, Ucon stood at attention next to ZX-05. They had been assigned to the DC squad as 09 and 10. The squad leader, DC-01, glared at them from behind her mask.

“I don’t like that I have been assigned two mechs from the bottom of the list but the two of you got the highest scores on the combat training. However, training is nothing compared to real combat. If you slow us down, you’ll be back on scrap duty if the Autobots don’t get you first.”

“I already tried to convince AA-00 to let me stay on scrap duty. They said no.”

“DC-09!” She stepped up to him. “I know about your reputation. You think you’re a real funnybot. I do not tolerate goof-offs so you better shape up.”

“Ha. AA-00 already tried getting me to do that and it hasn't worked so far,” Ucon replied in amusement. Then he turned serious. “But one thing I have never failed to do is protect my team. So I will do my best to do that, number one, ma’am.” He saluted.

As soon as he was able to get away from his new squad, he hurried up to the flight deck, pulsing urgency across his bond to Whiskey. Upon reaching the deck, Ucon transitioned his paint job to his
usual matte black and took to the shadows. It was nighttime so blending in was easy. A couple minutes later there was a soft thump as Whiskey landed on the deck.

“Ucon?” his disembodied voice called quietly.

Ucon shifted in the shadows. “Over here.”

Whiskey hurried over to him. “What’s the matter, Spark? You usually don’t call for me.”

Ucon pushed up his mask. “I’ve been transferred.”

“Transferred?”

“To the combat squads. I am now DC-09.”

“The combat squads?” Ucon could hear the realization and worry creeping into his partner's voice. “But that means you’ll be leaving the Nemesis-”

“And engaging the Autobots. Yes, I know. I tried to get AA-00 to not transfer me but they wouldn’t listen. Whiskey, you have to tell the Madam. Ask her to talk to the Autobots. My chances of being killed on this mission have gone up tenfold if they don’t show some restraint.”

A servo caught Ucon’s arm. “Then leave with me right now, Ucon.”

“I can’t.”

“The Madam won’t blame you for leaving because it got too dangerous.”

Ucon shook his helm. “That’s not it, Whiskey. I can’t leave because I care too much about the rest of the vehicons.”

Whiskey sighed. He wrapped his arms around Ucon and pulled him close. Optics closed, the shorter mech’s helm thunked against his chest plates and his servos found their way around his back to hug Whiskey tightly.

“Sometimes I wish your spark wasn’t so big.”

Ucon chuckled, turning his helm so he wasn't talking into Whiskey's chest. “You know that if I had to choose, I would always pick you over them, right?”

“I know, Spark, I know. But you know that every time you leave the Nemesis now, you’ll have an escort.”

“I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

“Now then.” He pulled away and retrieved a canister of red En from his subspace. “I’ll give you this. Just in case.”

Ucon nodded, took the canister and subspaced it. “Thank you. Please remember to talk to the Madam for me.”

“I will.” His servo cupped the back of Ucon’s helm and he leaned down to put their forehelms together. “You go get some recharge.”

Ucon looked at where he figured Whiskey's optics might be but all he saw was the bit of the ship behind his partner and it somehow made him feel lonely even though he knew Whiskey was close
enough that he could kiss him. “Only if you let me see you. Just for a moment.”

Whiskey did not hesitate. He turned visible and smiled at him. “How is this?”

There he was, optics shining in the dark, so close that Ucon's own optics had to refocus to see him properly. Smiling as well, he raised his servo to trace the side of Whiskey’s helm. “Much better. You know what I just realized.”

“What?”

“I get to leave the Nemesis for patrol. We could go on a date.”

Whiskey caught his servo as he straightened up and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I look forward to it. Now get back inside before someone comes looking for you.” He pushed Ucon out of the shadows and turned invisible again.

“Alright. Alright. I’m going.” Pulling down his mask, Ucon switched his paint back to purple and hurried into the ship.

“There he is.” Breakdown spotted Ucon as he was heading to his quarters. “ZZ-05!”

“I don’t understand how you can tell all of them apart,” commented Knock Out, keeping pace with his partner.

“It’s pretty easy once you get to know ‘em,” Breakdown replied. To Ucon, who had stopped to wait for them, “ZZ-05, we’ve been looking for you.”

“Uh.” Ucon shifted on his pedes. “I guess you haven’t heard. It’s DC-09 now, sir.”

Breakdown looked startled. “Oh. You’ve been transferred to the combat squads?”

Ucon nodded. “Yes, sir. Did you need me for something?”

“Knock Out just wanted to know where you learned your medical skills.” Breakdown gestured to the red medic standing beside him.

“You mean that eradicon I helped? That was just basic first aid.”

“Basic my aft.” Knock Out crossed his arms. “You could be a medic.”

Ucon shook his helm. “Hardly. Fritz probably would have laughed at my work and told me three ways he could do it better.”

“Fritz?” asked Knock Out, curious.

“A medic I served with a long time ago.”

“And what happened to Fritz?” One optic ridge raised.

Ucon shrugged. “Last I heard, he might’ve joined the Neutrals.”

“Damn.”

Ucon stared. “Sir?”
“I was looking for more help in the medbay. I could have you transferred-”

“Thanks but no thanks.” Ucon glanced at Breakdown. “Soundwave would not allow it.”

“Huh? What does Soundwave have to do with this?” Knock Out asked.

“Five, I told you-” Breakdown started.

“Nine,” Ucon corrected, interrupting. “It’s Nine now. And I’m sorry, Knock Out, sir.”

“Does AA-00 know that Soundwave is watching you?” asked Breakdown.

“Not to my knowledge. I think they would’ve asked me about it by now if they did.”

“Why is Soundwave watching you?” Knock Out demanded.

“Because I-”

Breakdown finished for him. “ Asked the Neutrals to save me.”

“Oh.” Realization dawned on Knock Out. “So you know Tango?”

Ucon shrugged. “Maybe. I’m sorry, commanders, but I need to go recharge. So, if you’ll excuse me…”

“Of course, ZZ--DC-09. Go ahead.”

“Thank you.”

While Ucon was out on his third patrol, he snuck off and met up with Whiskey. They settled down by a secluded lake in the middle of nowhere. Whiskey sat against the trunk of a tree, its large canopy hiding them from the night sky. Ucon sat between his legs, letting his partner massage his wings. After a while, the eradicon leaned back against the larger mech and Whiskey wrapped his arms around his waist.

Ucon sighed, content. “I wish we could have peace like this forever.”

“Then life would be kinda boring,” Whiskey rumbled against his back.

Ucon laughed. “Well then, I wish the war was over and I could at least enjoy life with you.”

“Now that I can agree with.” Whiskey hummed a note or two before asking, “Say, Ucon?”

“Hm?”

“Who do you want to win?”

“Not the Decepticons. Or at least not Megatron.”

“But you don’t really trust the Autobots either.”

“Only as far as I can throw Kilo.”

“Hmh. Which is to say, you don’t at all?”
“Well, maybe as far as I can throw you. I trusted Optimus enough to not shoot me when I stepped between him and my squad.”

“So, a little.”

“Only a little. But, honestly, I think the Madam would do a better job.”

“Hm, yes. But, if we were to somehow revive Cybertron, I doubt she would want to lead. And I doubt that everyone would want to follow a Laserblade.”

“Those mechs can get fragged. The Madam is a great leader. Speaking of… did you talk to her?”

“Yes. She asked me why I didn’t pull you out. I told her it was your decision to stay. She respects that and promised to talk to the Autobots. And she ordered me to stay close to you.”

“Like you need to be ordered to do that.”

Ucon got up and turned around so he was on his knees. Servos on Whiskey’s shoulders, he leaned in close so their faces were just inches apart. Whiskey’s fans immediately clicked on and his servos went to Ucon’s hips. Ucon didn’t say anything. He didn’t need to. Whiskey could tell what he was thinking thru their bond. But just before they kissed, Ucon’s comm crackled.

{DC-09, where are you? We’re heading back to the Nemesis now.}

Sighing in defeat, Ucon dropped his helm on Whiskey’s shoulder. “Damn…”

“It’s alright, Spark,” Whiskey said, planting a kiss on the side of his helm. “At least we finally got to have a date. What’s it been? Years?”

“Yes,” agreed Ucon as he got to his pedes and then helped Whiskey up. As he did, he quickly kissed him on the mouth before he could straighten up fully. “Care to fly me home, good sir?”

“It would be my pleasure,” Whiskey replied with a grin.

One of the smaller mines had been completely stripped. DC squad was ordered to go and pick up the last of the energon. The miner squad would take care of the mining equipment. It was going smoothly. The energon was loaded up and ready to go at the entrance. The miners were almost finished cleaning up inside. Then the earth started shaking.

“Look out!” Ucon yanked the closest miner to him out of the way as the ceiling collapsed.

“No! My squad!” she cried as they disappeared behind a pile of rocks.

As the dust cleared, DC-01 called for a ground bridge.

Ucon spun to face her. “What are you doing?” he demanded. “We need to help the miners.”

“Our orders were to collect the energon from this mine,” DC-01 replied coolly. “That’s it. I’ll report the cave-in to AA-00 and let them handle it. For now, we are returning to the Nemesis.”

“But, ma’am-” Ucon started.

“No buts, DC-09!” she snapped.
“I’m not going,” the miner declared.

DC-01 shrugged. “As you wish.” And turned to give orders as the ground bridge appeared.

Ucon just stood there. The miner stared up at him. There was a servo on his arm and reassurance from Whiskey across their bond.

[It’s alright, Ucon. I’ll take care of it.]

Ucon pulsed gratitude back to him as he leaned forward and whispered to the miner. “Don’t worry. You’re in good servos.”

“Let’s go, Nine!” DC-01 yelled at him from the entrance.

“I’m coming,” he said, turning to follow his squad thru the ground bridge.

“What did he mean by that?” the miner asked after the bridge disappeared.

“It means he entrusted you to me.”

She jumped in surprise and stumbled back when Whiskey materialized out of thin air next to her.

“Wh-who are you?” she sputtered.

“My name is Whiskey and I’m here to help you.”

“Y-you know DC-09?”

“By another name but yes, I know him. Very well.” He turned and started picking up rocks off the pile and tossing them to the side.

She just watched him warily. “A-are you a Decepticon?”

He paused with a rock in his servos and glanced back at her. “Do I look like one?”

“You have a v-vehicon mask.” She pointed at the mask hiding his faceplates.

“I used to be an eradicon just like DC-09,” he said, tossing the rock aside.

“Used to be?” she asked curiously, coming over to help.

“DC-09 and I were part of the same squad. After an Autobot attack one night, we were the only two survivors. I was barely alive and he looked after me until we were picked up by some Neutrals.”

Together, they pushed a larger rock out of the way.

“What happened after that?” she wanted to know.

“I stayed with the Neutrals and he went back to the Cons.”

She stopped and looked up at him. “You chose to leave the Decepticons?”

“Yep.”

“Do we really have a choice? Is it really possible to leave?”
After tossing another rock aside, Whiskey turned and looked at her. He bent so he was closer to her level and gently poked her in the chestplates.

“You have a spark, don’t you?”

“Y-yes.”

“And you can think for yourself, can’t you?”

“I can.”

He straightened and put a servo on his hip. “Then you can choose to leave to Decepticons if you want to. Mind you, it is not something you should do lightly. It really wasn’t an easy choice for him to go back.”

“Why?”

“Because he and I are bonded.” He knocked the side of his fist on his own chestplates. “And since he went back, we haven’t been able to see each other.”

“If you were bonded, then why did he go back?” She was incredulous. “Why didn’t he stay with you?”

“Because he wanted to help the other vehicons, like yourself. And he felt he couldn’t do that as a Neutral.” He was making that up, of course. Liliy had asked Ucon to go back as a spy, since he was the only one who had retained his original eradicon frame.

“Then why didn’t you go with him?”

“Because I was tired of the fighting. With the Neutrals, I could be at peace.”

“But aren’t you worried that DC-09 might be killed?”

“Oh, I am. But when he first went back I didn’t have to worry too much. He was stationed on the Nemesis as ZZ-05.”

“Oh! I know him. Always getting in trouble with AA-00. There was some reassigning done recently, wasn’t there? Since we have lost so many.”

“Yes. Now I worry about him so much that I follow him around whenever he leaves the Nemesis.”

“Wh-”

He stopped and held up his servo. “Sh, sh. Do you hear that?”

She stopped and listened with him. Then Whiskey suddenly pulled her aside as a drill came plowing thru the pile.

“Watch where you’re going, Mike!” Whiskey snapped, after the drill came to a halt. “You almost ran us over.”

“Oh, sorry, Whiskey,” said the copper plated miner behind the controls of the drill.

“Sorry my aft,” Whiskey growled.

Mike noticed the femme beside the larger mech. “Hello, who’s this?” He hopped off the drill and
pushed up his mask.

She flared her armor and attempted to appear threatening. “I’m VQ-03.”

She failed miserably when Mike flashed his most charming smile.

“A pleasure to meet you, Viniq.” He took her servo and pressed a gently kiss on her digits.

Flustered, she pulled her servo away and squeaked, “V-viniq?”

“Isn’t that what VQ stands for?” He was still smiling, charming.

“No? I mean—No,” she corrected quickly. “VQ is what squad I’m in.”

“Oh. That’s too bad. I think the name Viniq rather suits you.”

“Hhhh!” A bronze plated miner appeared behind him and smacked him upside the helm. “Mike! Stop flirting! We’ve got work to do!” To VQ-03, “I apologize for my brother’s behavior.”

Surprised, she just nodded. She wasn’t sure what to make of them.

Nova turned to the taller mech. “Whiskey, the rest of her squad has already been recovered.”

“Thank you, Nova.”

“What does that mean?” the femme asked.

“Means it’s time for us to go too.” Whiskey gestured to the ground bridge that opened near them. “After you.”

She drew in a deep vent and stepped into the portal.

“Hey, DC-09! Did you hear what happened to that miner squad you left behind?”

“No. What happened?”

“AA-00 sent a rescue team down to the mine and when they got there, the cave was open and the miner squad was gone. It was like they had vanished without a trace. Apparently you couldn’t even tell that the cave had been a mine.”

“Wow. That’s crazy.”

“So what happened out there?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, with you. I would’ve thought that this would’ve been one of those incident were you would’ve disobeyed a direct order in order to help. You did it all the time when you were in the ZZ squad.”

“That was when I was safely on the Nemesis. Out in the field is totally different. One wrong move could compromise the entire team.”

“Yeah. Tell me about it. But I’m surprised you figured that out so quickly.”
“I was in a combat unit before I joined the Nemesis crew you know. I… know what it’s like to lose your entire squad. We’ve all lost. And we’ll probably keep losing if this war continues.”

“Yeah. You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Me too, DD-03. Me too.”

After the rescue team had reported back, AA-00 had gotten upset with DC-01 for not at least helping a little. Upset was understatement, actually. They were downright angry. That was another five miners gone. DC-01 was demoted and put in charge of the lowest eradicon combat squad HO. DD-01 took her place and all the other Ones shifted up under him.

She confronted Ucon later.

“This is all your fault!” She jabbed him in the chestplates.

“How is this my fault?” He took a step back, opening his servos in a non-threatening manner. “If you had listened to me and stayed to help the miners, this wouldn’t’ve happened. So this is your fault, not mine.”

She suckerpunched him. Ucon fell back against DC-06 and DC-10 who were behind him. The vehicons who happened to be behind her grabbed her arms and held her back when she tried to hit him again. Energon dripped from his mouth as his companions pushed him upright.

“Are you ok, Nine?” DC-10 asked.

“Yeah.” Ucon wiped away the energon.

“What is going on here?”

It was DA-01. While he wasn’t technically in charge of anyone but his own squad, the other eradicons looked up to him and respected him. Most of them anyway.

“Nothing you need to stick your nasal guard into, Dane,” she snapped, adding the human name he had picked out as an insult.

“HO-01, this was your mistake,” Dane said. “You were in charge of your team.”

“I was following orders!”

“And now we are short a miner squad. And you have been demoted. Perhaps you should stop and consider your fellow vehicons next time before you follow your orders to the letter. Like ZZ-05 used to.” He glanced at Ucon.

Ucon lowered his gaze. “I don’t have that luxury anymore,” he mumbled before turning to leave. No one stopped him.

“DC-09!”

Ucon turned to find the source of the cheerful voice that called him. He spotted GL-10 waving at him. Her other arm was linked with another femme who he assumed was her partner that he had
saved. The glass on her chassis had been replaced but there was still a big weld mark on her armor underneath it. He waited for them to get closer before he spoke.

“Hello, Glen. And you must be Glados? So glad to see you up and about.”

GL-05 smiled. “I hear I have you to thank for that.”

“You are most welcome,” he said with a slight bow. “But how did you find me?”

“It took some asking around,” admitted Glen, “but I was surprised to learn that someone with medical training like yourself wasn’t transferred to the medbay.”

“I had to decline Knock Out’s offer for various reasons.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Are you two on break?”

“Yep. We were just heading down to get a cube.”

“Do you mind if I join you?”

“Are you sure you want to be seen with us lower-ranks?” asked Glados.

“What nonsense are you spewing? We’re all comrades,” Ucon replied.

“I’ll drink to that.”

Later, on his off-shift, Ucon laid back on his berth and wondered how long it would be before he ran into the Autobots and his true colors were revealed.

Chapter End Notes

A special shoutout to Lizwuzthere for helping with some of the details. (Find her on here or Tumblr, she is great!) [Plus, AA-00 technically belong to her.]
Liliy had access to every room in the base. But she never liked violating the privacy of her ‘boys’ quarters. That was their space. Yet there she was, standing outside the door to Pepper’s room, transmitting the override code for it to open. She was only there because the others had expressed concern about Pepper’s wellbeing. He had been locked in his room pretty much since she had returned from her stay on the Nemesis with Orion Pax. The only time he was seen was when he came out to get some energon. But he never said anything to anyone.

The door slid open and Liliy stepped into the room. It took a second for her optics to adjust to the dim lighting. The lights were off so the room was only illuminated by the glow of the five active monitors that dominated one wall. There was a berth on the other side of the room and a small table next to it that had several empty cubes stacked on top. The owner of the room, a mech with a ridiculously bright, neon yellow paint job, stood in front of the monitors, digits tapping away at the keys on the terminal, off in his own little world.

“Hey, Pepper,” Liliy said, stepping farther into the room. “What are you doing in here? Nobody’s seen you for a while expect when you come out to get a cube.”

“Research.” At least he acknowledged that she had spoken to him.

“Research?” She zipped up to his shoulder so she could get a better view of the monitors. Familiar glyphs scrolled across the main one. “Wait. Is that the Iacon database?”

“Yes, ma’am. After you downloaded it to our mainframe, I tried picking up where Orion left off. It has taken me awhile to figure it out but I finally finished decoding the next entry.” He brought up the coordinates and a map on one of the side monitors. “So if you want to send someone to go get it, I’ll continuing working on the next one.”

“Oh, lovely,” she said, staring at the map. “The equator. Near a volcano. This should be fun. Send the coordinates to the Comm center. And feel free to ask for help if you need it, Pepper.” She dropped back to the floor.

“I may consult Optimus later. Two helms would be better than one.”

“Especially if Soundwave is working on decoding this as well,” she added as she headed for the door.

Romeo, Delta, and Yankee came out of the ground bridge on the side of a volcano. Yankee immediately transformed and took to the air.

“Are you sure we’re at the coordinates Pepper supplied to us?” asked Delta, looking around the mostly black landscape. Steam billowed from vents around the area and there was plant life growing at the edges of the obvious lava path. The terrain was so uneven they lost sight of Yankee.

“Yes, Delta.” Romeo looked up from the scanner in his servo. “Do you really think Alfa would get them wrong?”

“Then where is the relic or whatever?” He gestured to their immediate surroundings which were nothing but volcanic rock.
Yankee came back and hovered over their helms. “Found it!” he called loud enough to be heard over the sound of his rotors. “The lava flow moved it down the slope.”

“Tch. I was hoping that I wouldn’t have to drive on this terrain,” grumbled Romeo as he stowed the scanner in his subspace.

“You could just walk,” Delta suggested, transforming into his alt. It was a hook and chain tow truck painted white with blue and yellow detailing. “Or get a taller alt.”

“Hmh. If only you were a flatbed,” Romeo shot back, crossing his arms.

“Ha. You only get a tow if you’re broken.” He raised and lowered the boom on his back making the chains rattle. “No free rides otherwise.”

Romeo just glared at him under his mask.

{Are you guys coming or what?} Yankee asked thru the comm since he had already flown off again.

“Yeah, yeah,” answered Romeo.

Delta spun his dual rear tires as he sped off in the direction that Yankee had gone. Romeo sighed and took off after them at a jog. The rocky terrain soon opened up to a flat lava flow. Romeo transformed then and raced to catch up with Delta. When they reached the spot where the relic container was, Yankee was already there waiting for them, arms crossed and his digits clicking on his plating. The grounders transformed and Delta went over to the almost spherical container. Kneeling next to it, he only had the lid open long enough to glance inside before he slammed it closed again.

“What is it?” asked Yankee with a curious tilt of his helm.

“Tox-En,” hissed Delta, not taking his optics off the container as if he expected the contents to leak out.

Romeo took a small step back in horrified disgust. “Tox-? Why in the Allspark would someone keep that?”

“What should we do with it?” asked Yankee. He waved at the container. “We can’t take something like back to base.”

“I say we should destroy it, but we should confirm with the Madam first.” Delta touched his comm. “Delta to Base. Is the Madam around?”

{I’m here, Delta. What do you need?} Liliy answered immediately.

He sat back on his heel struts. “We found the relic. We need to know what to do with it.”

{What is it?}

“Tox-En.”

The three flinched when Liliy suddenly and angrily started spouting curses in Lassic, the Laserblades’ dialect of Cybertronian. Then: {Why the frag would they save something like that?}
“That’s what I asked,” replied Romeo.

{Destroy it. We don’t need Megatron getting his grubby servos on it.}

“The container too?” asked Delta.

{Yes. It’s been contaminated so we can’t use it for anything.}

“We can toss the Tox-En into the volcano,” offered Yankee. “Then use a grenade to destroy the container.”

{Whatever works for you, as long as you get rid of all traces. Try your best not to expose yourselves to it. But I want all three of you to report to the medbay once you return just to be safe.}

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Roger that.”

“We’ll be careful.”

{You better be. Lilly out.} The comm was terminated.

“So how are we going to do this?” asked Yankee.

“Weeeell… Only one of us can fly so…” Romeo hedged.

“Seriously, Rom’?” The copterbot turned to the dark red mech with his servos on his hips.

“Yes, Yank’. Just fly up to the top of the volcano,” he gestured to the mountain as if he was tossing something at it, “and throw it in. Easy peasy.”

“Um. Not so much,” interrupted Delta. He was still kneeling next to the container, trying to move it.


Delta looked up at them. “The container is stuck in the lava rock.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Does this mean we have to call for a miner?” Yankee wanted to know as his servo started to move to his comm.

Delta shook his helm. “I think I might have a little something.” He pulled a small servo-held drill from his subspace.

“Is that one of those things from the Rescue Bots?” Yankee asked, stepping closer so he could get a better look.

“Yep.” Delta raised the tool. “Power up and Energize!” A bolt of energy surged thru his arm to power up the drill.

Romeo facepalmed. “Oh Primus, you sound ridiculous.”

“Oh, I know. But that’s how it works. Embarrassing you is just an added bonus,” Delta said with a
“Speaking of Rescue Bots…” Yankee spoke as Delta used the drill to chip away the rock around the container. “Have you gone to meet Boulder yet?”

The drill slipped momentarily, scraping against the side of the container. “I haven’t had time.”

“Are you sure that is the problem?” asked Romeo.

Delta paused, sitting back with the drill in his lap. “I guess it’s because he’s an Autobot and we used to be Decepticons.”

“Yeah. But wasn’t he in stasis for most of the war? He probably doesn’t care about that kind of thing, ya know?”

“You’re probably right.” Delta applied the drill again, working around the container until it moved.

“Oh, you got it free,” observed Yankee.

“Great. You two can take it up there. I’ll just wait here for you,” commented Romeo.

“That would be fine,” Yankee said as he started back up the slope on ped. “Except you’re the only one with the grenades.”

“How about a ped race?” Delta asked, latching the container to his back with his tow cable and chains. “Last one to the top takes the others’ scrub duties for a week. One rule: no Red En.”

“Hoho. You’re on, Delta!” Romeo exclaimed as he ran past the tow truck.

However, they were both suddenly blasted backward by a burst of air from Yankee’s rotors.

“Yankee! What in the Pit?!” yelled Romeo, getting back to his pedes.

“Delta said the only rule was we couldn’t use Red En,” explained Yankee with a smirk.

“Oh, you son of a-! Just you wait!”

Delta laughed as he watched Romeo chase after Yankee. He broke into a jog, following them as they bickered back and forth while trying to trip each other up. It wasn’t until they were almost to the top that Delta joined the fun.

Romeo was in front now with Yankee following and yelling threats for some trick Romeo had pulled. Delta had taken a slight detour but thanks to their bickering slowing them down, he had been able to keep up and was now directly in line with them. He pulled out the spare cable he carried just in case and formed a lasso loop.

Romeo yelled as he was suddenly jerked backwards, the cable wrapped around his shoulders. He collided with Yankee who had just managed to gain some ground. They both tumbled over and rolled couple of times before they slammed into a boulder. Delta smirked as he sprinted the last few yards to the top. As he stood there, looking over the crater, servos grabbed his pedes.

“Delta!” Yankee snarled, pulling himself up onto the rocky edge.

“You fragging bastard!” Romeo growled beside him. “That hurt!”

“I’m so sorry!” Delta replied sheepishly as they got to their pedes on either side him. Both of them
radiated ‘murder’, so he tried to lighten the mood. “You both made it here at the same time, so who gonna get the scrub duties?”

They both just glanced at each other and then together shoved him back down the side of the volcano after they relieve him of the container.

“Looks like you’re getting them, Delta,” called Romeo after him.

“Yeah. Thanks a lot, Delta,” Yankee called as well.

Delta sat up and rubbed his helm. “Hhh. I should’ve seen that coming,” he muttered to himself. He got to his pedes and climbed back up to help the other two dispose of the Tox-En and the container.

After they ground bridged back, Liliy met them in the receiving room.

She looked them up and down with a raised optic ridge. “Why does it look like the three of you got in a fight?”

“It was just a friendly ped race,” Romeo explained with a shrug.

“Is that it? I guess someone has extra scrub duties then?”

Romeo and Yankee looked at Delta who was the least dented of the three. He sighed.

“I do,” Grumbling, he added, “Even though, I was the one who actually finished first.”

“Really?” she asked. “And who is responsible for Yankee’s bent rotors?”

“Romeo when he knocked him over.”

“You mean when you yanked him off his pedes with your tow cable and used him to bowl me over?” Yankee countered.

“I don’t know if you noticed but I dislocated a wheel in that fall.” Romeo twisted his left leg to show them that the wheel there was no longer sitting straight.

“Alright, alright. You win,” Delta admitted in defeat, raising his servos in surrender. “I was the one who suggested the race anyway. I will accept my defeat.”

“Great!” Romeo threw his arm around Delta’s shoulders. “Then let’s go get a drink!”

“Medbay first, boys,” Liliy reminded them as they were heading for the main hall.

“Ah… yes, ma’am!”

“You were right, Madam,” commented Echo. Liliy looked up at him from where she was sitting on the Comm center’s main console. “We kept track of the coordinates like you suggested and the Decepticons did show up. But not until about 20 hours after we got there.”

Liliy watched the Decepticon signals move around on the monitor. “So Soundwave is working on decoding the database too.” She jumped off the console and headed for the door. “I’ll let Pepper know.”
"And who is this?" Liliy asked, eyeing the femme.

Mike gently caught the femme’s arm and lifted her servo. “This is the lovely Viniq.”

Obviously disturbed, the femme pulled her arm out of Mike’s grasp. Shaking his helm, Nova grabbed his brother by the panels that jet out from his back and dragged him off while he complained.

Liliy watched them go and then turned to Whiskey, inquiring, “Viniq?”

“This is VQ-03,” Whiskey clarified. “The only conscious member of the VQ miner squad. They were trapped by a cave-in. DC-09 left them in my care.”

“Ah! Thank you for reminding me. I need to go do that right now. But the rest of VQ is…?"

“Medbay for mostly minor injuries.”

“Then take her there and let Julian talk with her, explain things. She is still laid up and is quite bored. And that leaves you free to go if needed.” She looked up at VQ-03 with a smile. “We will respect your decision whatever it may be.” She turned and headed for the receiving room.

VQ-03 watched the little femme go and asked, “Who was that?”

“That was our leader. The Madam of the Cybertronian Rebel Corps.”

She looked up at him, surprised. “That was your leader? But she’s so small.”

Whiskey chuckled. “Don’t let her size fool you. She is capable of taking down mechs bigger than Megatron in an astroklik. But that’s not why we follow her.” He turned and headed for the medbay.

She hurried to keep up with his longer strides. “Why do you follow her?”

He stopped suddenly. Pushing up his mask, he regarded her with thoughtful optics. “Because she looked at us and saw more than just drones. She saw us as individuals. Sparks, worth saving.”

Liliy bridged over to the Autobot base and found everyone in the main room.

“Optimus,” she said, climbing the stairs to the top tier. “I need to talk to you. Actually, I would like all of your Autobots to listen.”

“What is it, Liliy?” Optimus asked as the other Autobots gathered around to listen.

“How do I say this? I need you to start pulling your punches.”

“To do what now?” repeated Arcee.

“To start pulling your punches. You see, Ucon, my spy on the Nemesis, has been transferred to the combat units and sooner or later his squad is going to run into one of you and I don’t want him to die.”
“Why don’t you just pull him out?” Bulkhead asked.

“He doesn’t want to leave. Unlike some people, he actually cares about what happens to the vehicons. I do believe you ran into him, Optimus, when you went looking for Megatron on the Nemesis before that thing with Unicron.”

“The eradicon who told his squad not to fight me. I remember.”

“Also my request is not just for Ucon’s safety but the safety of whoever attacks him as well.”

“What do you mean?”

“Whiskey, our mech who can turn invisible, is his sparkmate. He follows Ucon around and will not hesitate to defend him. Violently if necessary.”

“Whiskey? The gold and brown flyer?” chirped Bumblebee.

“I mean he might hold back because you’re my friends but don’t hang your hopes on that.”

“So we just have to pull our punches with the eradicons,” observed Arcee.

“I was hoping that you try your best to stop killing vehicons all together.”

“So they can come back and fight us again?” Ratchet grumbled. “Aren’t you asking a bit much, Liliy?”

“I’m just asking you to disable them without killing them. If you can do that… Please promise me you’ll at least try.”

Optimus sighed. “Liliy, we have been fighting this war for a very long time. To change how we fight now—”

“Don’t give me that scrap, Optimus!” Liliy snapped. “How about I put it this way: Every spark you extinguish puts our race one step closer to extinction.”

“But the vehicons are just—” started Arcee.

“The vehicons may all look alike but they have sparks just like the rest of us. And let me remind you that there are more of them than you guys, the Decepticon officers, and all my ‘boys’ combined. Overwhelming us all with sheer numbers and ending this war wouldn’t be too hard for them.”

“Then why haven’t they?”

“Because they don’t believe they can. If you start thinking of them as individuals, maybe my request won’t be so hard.”

“But they are trying to kill us.”

“So are the officers and yet…”

“Very well, Liliy,” Optimus said finally. “We promise to try and hold back while fighting.”

Liliy bowed with her servo over her spark. “Thank you, Optimus. That is all I came to ask for.”
"Madam!" Pepper called excitedly as he entered the rec room. "I finished the next one. It's in Antarctica so I would be the best mech to go get it."

"But isn't Antarctica really cold?" Indy leaned over and whispered to his twin.

"What are you saying? Pepper is a snow plow," Golf whispered back. "He'll be in his element."

“Oh, right. I forgot that mech actually likes the cold.”

“Ok, I understand why Hirry is here but why did you bring me along?” asked Oscar with a shiver as the group trudged across the icy landscape. It wasn’t snowing but there was a frigid wind blowing around.

“In case we need a flier,” Pepper informed him as he walked at the front. “Yankee was busy so we brought you.”

“There are other fliers,” grumbled Oscar.

“Hover flight is best for these types of missions,” Hirry said, “so our options were limited.”

“Whatever. Let’s just hurry and find the relic so we can go home where it’s warm.”

They finally made it to the coordinates only to find a large hole in the ice cliff where the relic should have been and there were four red flags planted in front of the hole.

“Are you kidding?” groaned Oscar, his shoulders drooping.

“The humans beat us to it, huh,” mused Pepper. “I hope it wasn’t anything dangerous.”

“We better call the Madam.” Hirry reached for her comm. She contacted Liliy and explained the situation.

{I understand. There appears to be a human research facility a few kilks north of your position. I’ll call ahead to get them to evacuate and then meet you there. Alright?}

“Roger that.”

The trio was just coming up over the ridge overlooking the facility when three large helicopters took off. Down below, a ground bridge opened at the edge of the facility grounds and Liliy appeared.

“Race you!” challenged Hirry as she took two long strides down the slope before transforming into her alt.

Pepper quickly followed, leaping down the slope and transforming as he hit the flat ice at the bottom. He kept his plow blade lifted as he sped across the white ground. In normal conditions, Hirry’s smaller alt, a Hummer, would have easily outpaced a snow plow, but even with her preparations for such icy conditions, she was struggling to keep up with the heavier mech whose alt was made for snow.

However, it was Oscar who won the race. He even let the grounders have a huge head start before he leapt into the air and transformed. He crossed the space in half the time they did, landing on his
pedes next to Liliy just before the other two reached her.

“Well then, shall we find the relic?” asked Liliy.

It wasn’t too hard to find. The humans were keeping it in one of the warehouses. And it was still encased in ice. A few heavy strikes from Pepper and the ice broke.

“It looks like armor,” said Pepper as he picked up the odd shaped metal disk.

“Armor?” repeated Liliy from her place on Hirry’s shoulder.

“I think so. Bravo should know for sure though.”

“Then let’s take it back to base. It’s too cold here.” Liliy shivered.

“Thank Primus!” Oscar muttered.

After they brought the relic back, they had Bravo take a look at it. He confirmed it was armor, very old armor made by the Primes. He didn’t have time to run tests on it though so they decided to lock it away in the vault with the rest of the relics they had for the time being.

Oscar was his way to do just that when Starscream came up to him in the hallway.

“Oh, hello. What have you got there?” asked the seeker as he eyed the disk in Oscar’s servos.

“One of the relics we’ve been collecting,” Oscar explained.

That perked his interest. “Relics, hm? That looks like armor…” His optics gleamed. “…Of Decepticon origin.”

“I don’t think so. Bravo said this armor was probably made by one of the Thirteen. Most likely Solus Prime.”

“So it should be pretty good then?”

“We haven’t tested it yet but it’s supposed to be impervious to all attacks and enhances the user’s strength.”

“Is that so?” he purred as he dropped back a couple steps so he was behind Oscar.

Then Starscream stabbed him in the back. A quick, sharp jab, just like how he killed Cliffjumper, but right between the copterbot’s rotor blades and slightly to the right of the spinal strut so he just missed the spark chamber. Shocked, Oscar dropped the relic as he collapsed to the floor.

“Well, at least I let you live,” said Starscream as he picked up the relic. “Think of it as thanks for repairing me.”

There were pedfalls coming in their direction. Starscream quickly slipped around the nearest corner, the entrance way to the vault, and activated the armor. Tango came down the hallway and spotted Oscar on the floor. He ran to him, alarmed by the energon seeping out of the hole in his back.

“Oscar!” Tango knelt beside him and opened a comm. “Medical emergency to the vault! Oscar’s been stabbed!”
{Stabbed? By who?} asked Echo.

Starscream stepped out behind him. He grabbed Tango by a doorwing and lifted him off his pedes. Tango cried out in pain as the sensitive joint was strained, all his weight hanging from it. Even thru the pain, he heard his assailant laugh and recognized him.

“S-Starscream!”

Tango barely got the name out before Starscream, wearing the Apex Armor, threw him hard against the wall, wrenching the doorwing in the process. The orange mech slumped to the floor, unconscious.

Alfa appeared at the end of the hallway, blasters ready. He opened fire. Starscream laughed again as the bolts simply burst harmlessly on the armor and didn’t do any damage. He charged down the hallway toward Alfa. Deactivating his blasters, Alfa backed into the main hall as Starscream approached, his visor flickering to red. Starscream grabbed for him but he quickly sidestepped and caught the seeker’s arm. Starscream’s world blurred and then he found himself on his back, slightly dazed from the impact.

“You’re going to pay for that,” he growled as he climbed to his pedes.

In the armor, Starscream was almost as tall as Alfa, which meant he was also taller than Megatron at this point. The armor also made him bulkier than the dark grey mech who was watching him warily while taking defensive stance.

“Alfa, do you need help?” Mike called from the direction of the receiving room.

“What should we do?” asked his brother.

“Nova, open a bridge!” ordered Alfa, keeping his optics on Starscream.

“To where?” The miner sounded worried.

Alfa dodged a strike from Starscream. “Somewhere he won’t be a bother.”

“Got it!” Nova disappeared into the receiving room but Mike stayed in the doorway to watch.

“Oh? You think you can get me to leave?” purred Starscream, taking a swing at him again which he narrowly avoided.

“Alfa, Nova has a location set!” Mike called.

Alfa backed off a bit from Starscream. “Redirect to it to my receiver.”

“Eh? But-”

“Now!”

“Redirecting...”

Alfa dropped a small, round device on the floor between him and Starscream.

The seeker looked down at the device and then back up at Alfa with a raise optic ridge. “What are you planning?”

His answer was a ground bridge opening beneath their pedes. Starscream found himself in freefall
over the Pacific Ocean. Alfa fell with him but as soon as he was clear of the portal, he dove after the device. Once his servo closed around it, he transformed. Starscream shrieked as the huge but flat stealth plane streaked past him back toward the upper atmosphere and set him spinning. He flailed about but couldn’t come out of the spiral in time.

The armor absorbed most of the impact when he hit the water. He struggled a bit as he sank but he was too heavy. He kept sinking until there was no more light and the pressure would have no doubt crushed his frame if he didn’t have the armor. Finally he hit the bottom.

Starscream got his pedes. “I’m going to kill those Neutrals for this.” And started walking.

Liliy was beyond pissed when she heard about what happened. Megatron attacking the twins was one thing. They were his enemies in the way of his goal. He had never had any contact with them before. Sure, Liliy was angry about it but it wasn’t like they never got a chance to fight back. They gave him as much trouble as he gave them.

But Starscream on the other hand… They had helped Starscream, saved him from the pathetic state he was in. They fixed his leg, replaced his t-cog, and shared their energon with him. The only positive was that his t-cog was still disabled. But the fact that he stole the Apex Armor… that he nearly took the doorwing off a mech who had befriended him… that he stabbed one of her medics in the back…

“The Decepticons came sooner this time,” Lima commented. “It’s a good thing you held that evacuation order for the humans. The Cons destroyed their base looking for the relic.”

Liliy only hummed in response. She was distracted by the gray Decepticon signal on one of the side monitors that was slowly making its way across the ocean floor. Suddenly, she transformed the staff out of her arm. Twirling it once, she slammed the end down on the console.

Next they met, Starscream was going to pay dearly for he did.
There was a somber air around the base for a while after Starscream was kicked out. Oscar and Tango had been rushed to the medbay as soon as the threat was gone. Leecher and Foxtrot had to enlist the help of Delta and Seasar. Neither injury was light. Tango’s doorwing was almost completely separated from his back and the hole in Oscar’s back was dangerously close to his spark chamber.

After the surgeries, Liliy went to her room to recharge but she couldn’t get comfortable on her bed and her processor kept her awake despite her exhaustion. She finally got up and returned to the medbay. Leecher was still there keeping watch since they did not need to recharge as often.

“Lil’, what’s wrong? You’re supposed to be-”

“I can’t. My processor is too full. Too many thoughts.”

“Come here.” Leecher carefully picked her up and lifted her to their helm, the mask splitting open to allow her to climb inside. She did, falling into the seat with a ragged sigh and leaning her helm on her servo. Leech leaned over, extending their optic stems so they could see her face. “May I?”

The plates on her shoulder slid open. Leech latched onto the exposed shoulder strut with practiced ease and let the wires form the link between them. They gasped with shock as they synchronized and all of Liliy’s emotions flowed over to them. It had been a very long time since they had experienced something of this level from her. Usually the main emotion was fear. This time, however, it was anger. Burning. Hot. Fury! Most of it was directed at Starscream, but there was a good portion directed at herself as well.

[Liliy… what makes you think you are responsible for what happened today?]

They already knew since they were linked but they wanted her to admit it.

[...I should have known better. We should have put Starscream out as soon as he was well enough to stand on his own damned pedes. I knew we couldn’t trust him and yet I allowed him to stay. This is my fault.]

[Hmh. We all should have known better than to trust him. But he seemed like he was doing better. Really, he played us all for fools. All of us, understand? Not just you.]

[But I am their leader. I’m supposed to-]

[Protect them? Liliy… Don’t you say it all the time? ‘Nobody’s perfect.’ Besides, you are just one femme. You cannot protect everyone all of the time. As much as you might want to.]

The anger at herself ebbed a little.

[That is a start, I suppose. For now though, you need to recharge.]

Leech accessed Liliy’s overrides and forced her systems to shut down for recharge. She didn’t stop them. Leech disconnected from her as she slumped over in the seat. Normally they could stay connected and access her dreams while she recharged, but they needed to stay focused on the outside world in case something went wrong with the patients. Leech looked over at Liliy.

“Honestly, Starscream. You picked the worst femme to piss off.”
For the next couple of days, if no one needed her, Liliy spent most of her time in either the medbay, watching over Oscar and Tango, or in the Comm center, watching Starscream’s slow but steady trek across the ocean floor. She wasn’t sure what he was homing in on but he was definitely heading back toward North America rather than the closest landmass.

The Comm center was where Pepper found her.

“Madam...” He hesitated. The fury that was still radiating off her made all of her ‘boys’ uncomfortable. Even if it wasn’t directed at them. And they knew it was not likely to go away until the two in the medbay finally woke up.

“You finished the next set?” she asked quietly.

“Yeah, but it’s in Manhattan.” Pepper entered the coordinates into the console and brought them up on the main monitor. “Or more precisely: Under Manhattan.”

Liliy’s optics momentarily flicked over to the main before she went back to watching Starscream’s signal. “How do we get to it? We can’t exactly tear up a city block.”

“There appears to be a subway tunnel that runs right past it,” said Echo, having brought up a 3-D model of the city and its underground.

“So you’ll need a mining detail.” Liliy got to her pedes and climbed off the console. “I’ll leave the personnel assignments to you, Echo. I’m going to the medbay.”

Outside the Comm center, she met Alfa.

“Heading for the medbay, Madam?” he inquired as he knelt down and offered her his servo.

That obviously meant he wanted to talk to her so she stepped onto his waiting palm and let him lift her off the ground. As he started walking, he spoke his concerns.

“Madam, I feel like you are acting worse than Echo did when the twins were in stasis.”

Liliy jerked in surprise and looked up at him. His usual stoic expression was marred by a frown and there was obvious concern in his optics. Her gaze fell again.

“I’m sorry.”

“You have every right to be angry. That’s a given. All of us are upset by what happened but we’re afraid you might be taking it too far.”

Liliy kept her helm down and hugged herself. He was probably right. He usually often was. But it was so hard not to want revenge. The only thing stopped her from going after the seeker right now was the fact that he was still under water.

They were almost to the medbay when the door slid open and Seasar came rushing out, almost plowing into Alfa who nearly dropped Liliy. There was a bit of shuffling to avoid the collision and a quick apology from Seasar before she noticed the smaller femme clinging to Alfa’s servo.

“Oh, Madam! Perfect timing!” she exclaimed, practically bouncing on her heel struts. “They’re awake! Oscar and Tango just woke up!”
Seasar basically shoved Alfa into the medbay in her excitement. Alfa only allowed it because he was carrying Liliy and knew he needed to get her to them as quickly as possible.

“Tango! Oscar!” Liliy cried upon seeing them awake.

They smiled weakly at her. Liliy leapt off Alfa’s servo and onto the corner of Oscar’s med berth. Then she was on his chassis, curling up over his spark.

“Oscar,” she was practically sobbing. “I’m so glad you’re ok.”

Oscar shot the others a bewildered look as he carefully cup a servo around the shaking femme on top of him. They just smiled back at him.

“What happened to Starscream?” asked Tango.

“He already had the Apex Armor on when I got to the scene so my blasters were useless,” Alfa explained. “I engaged him in a bit of hand-to-hand to keep him distracted before we dropped him in the ocean.”

“Oscar, do you remember anything about the incident?” asked Foxtrot.

“Um, there was… a huge flare of pain in my back. I couldn’t stand up anymore. And I think Starscream said something about leaving me alive as thanks for helping him.”

“Doesn’t matter. He’s still going to pay for what he did to you two,” Liliy growled, still curled up on Oscar’s plating.

“Madam…”

“A mother will always defend her kits, I suppose,” Alfa commented.

Liliy sat up enough to peer over Oscar’s servo at the mech who was at least six times her height. “You think of me as your mother?”

The corner of his mouth briefly turned upward. “I believe the term Echo used was 'Sister-Mom' but, yes.”

“Geez, our mom is tiny.”

“Foxtrot!”

“What? It’s true!”

“Madam?” Oscar could feel her shaking again on his chassis. Her servo covered her face and she shook with some silent emotion.

“What’s wrong?” asked Foxtrot, leaning closer.

That set her shaking more but sound finally escaped her. She was laughing.

“Me,” she spoke between giggles, “a crippled outcast, the mother of a ragtag band of ex-Cons. What will Primus think of next?”

“There you are, Nova. Where’s Mike?” Romeo asked as the bronze miner entered the receiving
“Down in the catacombs,” Nova replied. “He wanted to see Viniq off.”

“So she decided to be with the rest of her squad, huh?” X-ray moved to stand closer.

“Yeah. Mike’s a little depressed about it but I think he’ll be ok. It’s not like she’s gone gone-just resting.”

“Yeah but who knows how long we’ll have to keep her in stasis,” Victor said, next to the bridge controls. “This war doesn’t look like it will be ending anytime soon.”

“You never know, Victor. Maybe it will.”

“Here comes Mike,” X-ray observed, catching a glimpse of him before he entered the receiving room.

“Sorry I’m late.” Mike lacked his usual enthusiasm.

“It’s fine,” Romeo replied. “Let’s get going.”

Victor typed in the coordinates and fired up the ground bridge. “Bridging you guys directly into the tunnel.”

“Roger that.”

The Decepticons, namely Knock Out, Breakdown, and a small squad of miners, showed up just as they were preparing to leave.

“You guys again?” Knock Out snapped from behind Breakdown as the blue mech brought out his hammer.

“You’re too late I’m afraid, Knock Out.” Romeo patted the container is X-ray’s servos and then waved the engineer and the miner brothers toward the ground bridge that had opened behind them. His visor flickering to red, Romeo slipped past Breakdown. Leaning into the surprised medic’s space, he tweaked the red piece on his chin. “But I’ll be sure to tell Tango that we saw you.”

“Why you…!” Flustered, Knock Out activated a sawblade and took a swing at him.

Romeo laughed while nimbly dodging him and then a swing from Breakdown.

“Be seein’ ya,” he said as he disappeared thru the ground bridge.

Romeo found Liliy in the medbay after they got back.

“The Cons are getting faster at decoding.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. They showed up just as we were leaving.” To Tango, “Knock Out says hi.”

Tango raised an optic ridge at him. “Did he actually say that or are you putting words in his
“Alright so he didn’t say hi but I did tell him I would let you know he was there.”

This time Soundwave went himself as soon as he had the coordinates. Upon arriving, he found Hirry and Zulu in the act of digging up the relic with a servo drill. Zulu stood to face him and buy time for Hirry to get the relic. He activated his arm blades as his visor flickered to red. Soundwave thrust a tentacle at him but he dodged aside and slipped in to slice at Soundwave’s lightly armored middle before pulling back. The cut was shallow so Soundwave ignored it. His tentacle was still out stretched so he swung it around and caught Zulu’s leg when he stopped. He yanked the black mech off his pedes and up into the air.

“ZULU!” Hirry yelled in alarm as the silent mech slammed him to the ground.

All three of them looked up at the roar of an engine. A car came flying off the cliff above. Wheeljack transformed in midair, pulling out his swords in the same motion. Soundwave let go of Zulu and leapt backwards to avoid being crushed under the falling wrecker’s blades. Wheeljack twirled his swords as he got to his pedes.

“Am I interrupting?” asked Wheeljack.

“Not at all,” replied Hirry as Zulu got back to his pedes. “Just keep him busy.”

“That I can do.”

Soundwave retracted his tentacle and stood waiting. With a yell, Wheeljack rushed at Soundwave. Soundwave dodged left, dodged right, and then spun, using his thin, knife-like arms to parry Wheeljack’s swords. Wheeljack spun round, swinging one sword up. Soundwave barely pulled back in time, the tip of the blade skimming his mask. Wheeljack continued to attack relentlessly. Soundwave dodged a few swings and then blocked a couple strikes with his arms. Catching one of Wheeljack’s blades between his arm and his chassis, Soundwave twisted and brought his other arm up to smack the wrecker’s servo. Wheeljack had to let go of the sword and was suddenly knocked away by Soundwave’s tentacle. He stumbled back and regained his balance. Soundwave took a second to examine the sword he now had in his servo. He refocused his gaze on Wheeljack with a silent challenge. Optics narrowing, Wheeljack took his remaining sword in both servos and charged Soundwave again with a yell. Soundwave flung his sword at him. Wheeljack simply batted it away and leapt at the silent mech, sword ready to strike from above. Soundwave caught him by the helm with his tentacle while he was in midair. He swung Wheeljack around and slammed him to the ground.

Zulu slammed into Soundwave’s side and sent him stumbling. Soundwave let go of the disoriented wrecker and faced the black mech. Zulu moved in again, delivering another shallow slice to Soundwave’s midsection. This time Soundwave did step back and cover the wound with his servo. He pulled his servo away to find energon on his digits. He looked up at Zulu.

“HEY!”

Soundwave turned in time to see Wheeljack leaping at him again. There was no time to counter. The protrusion on Wheeljack’s forehelm hit Soundwave square in the facemask. Soundwave stumbled back and shook his helm slightly, cracks spreading across the mask.

“There I go again,” Wheeljack quipped, “shattering expectations.”
“I got it!” Hirry cried, holding up the relic and drawing everyone’s attention.

Recognizing it as the Resonance Blaster, Soundwave suddenly deployed Laserbeak from his chest.

“Hirry, look out!” Zulu warned.

Hirry activated her blaster and fired at Laserbeak, but the minicon dodged the shots before firing back. One shot hit her shoulder and Hirry cried out as she dropped the relic. Laserbeak swooped in and grabbed the relic. Soundwave was distracted by Wheeljack and Zulu but he caught them with his tentacles and slammed them together before tossing them over to where Hirry was. Laserbeak returned to Soundwave and dropped the Resonance Blaster in his servo. While Laserbeak reattached to his chest, Soundwave stuck the relic on his arm and activated it.

“Scrap.” Hirry accessed her comm. “Hirry to base, we need-aaaAAAHHH!”

Her request turned into a pained scream as Soundwave turned the Resonance Blaster on her and the two mechs who were just getting back to their pedes. Soundwave chose a frequency that caused them all to lose consciousness. A ground bridge opened beyond them. Another black blur of a mech shot out of it and collided with Soundwave. They tumbled helm over heels together once before Soundwave was kicked away.

Echo was a slender mech like Soundwave. They were even the same height. The two Comm officers faced each other warily. Soundwave raised his servo and prepared to fire the Resonance Blaster again. Echo’s visor flickered back to orange as he closed the distance and kicked the relic off Soundwave’s arm. Soundwave glanced at the relic that had landed several yards away and then refocused on Echo who was much closer and moving in again. Echo aimed a kick at Soundwave’s helm but the silent mech blocked it with his arm. Soundwave used his tentacle to try and grab Echo but only succeeded in knocking him away. Echo tried again from the other side but had to leap back to avoid the tentacle before he could even make the kick.

“Tch. I understand now why the Madam failed.”

Soundwave tilted his helm in curiosity. Echo just activated his blasters and started blasting him with rapid-fire but non-lethal bursts. Crouching slightly to protect his body as well, Soundwave raised his arms to shield his helm and didn’t see the three other flyers come thru the ground bridge to grab the unconscious grounders. Echo kept shooting at Soundwave as he backed toward the bridge. He glanced over at the Resonance Blaster.

[Leave it.] Alfa ordered across their bond as he dragged Zulu into the portal. The twins had already gone thru with Wheeljack and Hirry.

After the shooting stopped, Soundwave lowered his arms in time to see the ground bridge disappear, all of his enemies gone. It was obvious that the ones wearing the vehicon masks were not trying to severely damage him. The black grounder’s attacks were shallow enough that his self-repair systems had already stopped the bleeding. Wheeljack, on the other hand, had been trying to kill him. Soundwave lifted a servo to his mask and traced one of the cracks in the glass. That’s when he noticed that the black flyer’s blasters had done some damage as well. His arms were blackened and they were starting to sting. Not to mention the fact that a few other aches and pains were making themselves known, like his back strut from crashing to the hard ground with the black flyer on top of him. The black flyer… He had said a curious thing.

“...understand now why the Madam failed.”

Soundwave felt that that was important and relevant to him. Though, he did not know who this
X-ray had heard the commotion and was waiting in the receiving room in case they need extra help. He hurried forward when he saw Wheeljack being dragged in. X-ray knelt at his side as Indy laid him down.

“Short Stuff? Hey, are you ok?" The wrecker didn’t respond. He gave his shoulder a little shake. “Wheeljack!”

Wheeljack groaned as he came online. “Just resting my optics.” Another groan. He lifted his servo to hold his helm. “And my audio receptors.” He froze suddenly and blinked up at X-ray. “You just said my name.”

“Only because you weren’t responding,” X-ray replied defensively. “I was concerned about your wellbeing.”

“Oh? Maybe I should get hurt more often,” Wheeljack quipped as X-ray helped him sit up.

“If you do that, I’m dumping you.” His servo lingered on the wrecker’s shoulder.

Wheeljack grinned at him. “I didn’t realize we were dating.”

X-ray sputtered, his faceplates heating. “That’s not- I mean- I’m glad you’re ok!” He roughly pushed off Wheeljack’s shoulder as he got to his pedes and all but ran off.

Some time later, Wheeljack went looking for X-ray. The twins pointed him in the direction of X-ray’s most likely hiding place: the forge. Like every other common room in the base, it was large enough to accommodate Kilo. The forge itself only occupied the back wall. There were several worktables and tool chests scattered about. Some with half-finished projects. If Wheeljack wasn’t there for a specific reason, he would have enjoyed looking around.

The only other apparent occupant in the room was the chief engineer, Bravo. The bulky mech was hunched over one of the worktables, mask on as he was welding.

“He’s in his workshop,” he told Wheeljack without even looking up, jerking his helm in the direction of said shop.

Wheeljack made his way over to the door he hadn’t noticed when he first walked in. It was shut but when he raised his servo to knock, it slid open. The mech he was looking for stood with his back to the door, leaning over an angled monitor and drawing on it with a stylus.

“Hey, X.”

X-ray didn’t look up from his work. “Hey.”

Wheeljack stepped into the room and looked around. The room was rectangular, the longest wall being the one across from the door. A workbench ran long that entire wall. Projects, tools, and spare parts were all organized. Labeled bins were stacked on shelves above and below the workbench. But what caught Wheeljack’s optic was the big, backlit case on the opposite wall from where X-ray was working. Blasters. A lot of them. Some meant to be servo-held. Others meant to
be built into the arm. At the center of it all was one such blaster with its familiar triangular shaped muzzle and pinkish-purple bio-lights.

Wheeljack let out a low whistle as he looked over the case. “Quite the collection you’ve got here.”

X-ray looked up then to see what he was talking about. “Oh, those? Yeah. I made most of them.”

Wheeljack looked back at him. “You made these?”

“Yeah.” X-ray joined him in front of the case. “All of them except the ones on the middle shelf here.” He gestured to said shelf. “The arm blaster in the middle is my original.”

Wheeljack glanced up at him. “Original?”

“From when I was a vehicon.”

“Ah. That’s why it looks so disturbingly familiar.” X-ray chuckled at that. “So what are you packing now?”

X-ray transformed his left servo into the blaster. “As far as looks, it’s almost the same. The bio-lights, obviously, a different color. What’s really different is on the inside. The original was your standard blaster, one type of shot. This one has multiple shot types. Non-lethal electro-charge. Non-lethal rapid-fire bursts. Your standard shot. And a mega burst that can punch a hole thru a vehicon tank’s defense armor. Or the chassis of a normal vehicon. But we are forbidden from using that setting unless we have no other option. Also because it drains a lot of power.”

“And you made that yourself?”

“I had some help from Delta and Bravo but yes. Everyone in the CRC has these blasters.” The blaster turned back into a servo.

Wheeljack was silent for a bit. “Listen, X-ray. About earlier-”

“Have the medics cleared you?” interrupted X-ray.

The Wrecker looked up. “Uh, yeah. Why?”

“Come with me.”

Wheeljack looked confused but followed after the blue mech. They left the forge and crossed the main hall to another equally large room that look a training hall. X-ray stopped in the middle of the floor and turned to Wheeljack.

“Fight me.”

“What? Why?”

“Because.”

“But I just fought Soundwave.”

“What’s a matter, Short Stuff?” taunted X-ray. “Afraid you’ll lose?”

Wheeljack grinned. “Not in a million years.” After they trade a couple punches, Wheeljack piped up again. “About what I was trying to say earlier. That thing before was meant to be a joke.”
"I know that," X-ray growled, falling back after a blocked kick.

"But if you’re willing, we could try it."

X-ray faltered. "You mean you want to date me?"

Wheeljack gave him a casual shrug. "Sure, why not?"

"Alright" X-ray moved in again. "But on one condition."

Wheeljack blocked his punch. "Let's hear it."

"No more killing vehicons."

Wheeljack frowned. "Then how am I supposed to fight them?" And lunged forward.

X-ray caught his arm and twisted, pulling the Wrecker over his shoulder. Blinking, Wheeljack realized he was flat on his back. X-ray was on top of him, knee pressing on his chassis and sharp claws against his neck cables. He remained very still even though he felt no killing intent from the mech on top of him.

"You are an expert swordsman, aren’t you?" X-ray removed his claws and leaned back. "There are lots of ways to disable them without killing them. Look at me. I used to be a vehicon and I just kicked your aft."

"Keyword there is former." Wheeljack put his servo on X-ray’s leg and gently pulled.

"There is another reason." X-ray allowed Wheeljack to guide his leg over his chassis until he was straddling the Wrecker. "Our spy on the Nemesis has been transferred to the combat units. Whoever hurts him will have to deal with his bonded."

Happy with their new position, Wheeljack put his servos on X-ray’s thighs and started exploring with his digits. "Who is?"

"Whiskey. Brown and gold flyer. He can turn invisible-Ah!" One of Wheeljack’s digits had gotten under his plating and brushed a sensitive wire. X-ray jerked slightly at the sensation. His fans clicked on. "W-what are you doing?" he asked, pushing Wheeljack’s servo away with his own.

Wheeljack smirked up at him. "Just getting to know my new partner’s frame. Have you never been with anyone before?"

X-ray forced his fans to shut off. "Of course I have. It’s just…" His shoulders fell a fraction and he looked away from the mech under him. "...been awhile."

Wheeljack grasped X-ray’s servo and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Then we can take it slow if you like."

X-ray met his optics and smiled, interlocking his digits with Wheeljack’s. "Thank you."

"Can I at least have a kiss?" Wheeljack asked, hopeful. "To make us official."

X-ray chuckled. "Of course." He leaned down, tilting his helm to avoid the protrusion on Wheeljack’s forehelm, and kissed him-

"Ew! Gross!"
“Get a room!”

X-ray jerked upright and Wheeljack tilted his helm back to look. The twins, Echo, and Leecher stood just inside the entrance to the training room.

“You guys!” Faceplates heating, X-ray quickly climbed off Wheeljack.

Indy crossed his arms. “Alfa and Echo have more decency than you two.”

Golf mimicked his stance. “Mmhmm.”

“How long you been standing there?” X-ray asked as he helped Wheeljack to his pedes.

“Don’t worry, X-ray,” Echo reassured him, the barest hint of an amused smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “We just walked in.”

Leecher stepped forward. “So are we to assume that something is going on between you two?”

“Yep.” Wheeljack, looking quite smug, grabbed X-ray’s servo and lifted it. “X and I are dating now.”

“Our congratulations then. One more thing to celebrate tonight.”

“Oh, we’re having a party tonight?” asked X-ray.

“A party?”

X-ray bumped against Wheeljack. “Yeah. Look forward to it, Short Stuff. Quebec makes the best high grade.”

“Oh?”

“Are you two done with this room then?” asked Leecher. “We need to use it.”

“Yes. Of course, Commander.” X-ray hurried toward the door, pulling Wheeljack along with him. “Let’s go get a room,” he said and made optic contact with the twins as he passed them.

Wheeljack smirked at the twins’ disgusted looks. “Whatever you want, sweetspark.”

“So where are you taking me?” asked Wheeljack as they made their way thru the halls.

“The washracks.”

“The wash-?!”

X-ray glanced back at him. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed but you’re filthy. When was the last time you had a good wash and wax?”

“I washed last time I was at the Autobot base. But I haven’t had a good wax in eons.”

“Well, we need to remedy that right away.”

They entered the washracks. It was a big, square room with several shower heads. And there were soap dispensers and clean cloths on benches in the center.
“Wow. It looks like there is enough shower heads in here for your whole crew.”

“One for everyone but the Madam and the Commander. However, I can’t remember a time that all of us have all been in here at once.”

It was easy to tell where the taller mechs showered as the shower heads started to move up the wall until the last one was on the ceiling. The most of the others were set at an approximate height to accommodate Whiskey and down. Save for a few that were set shorter for mechs like the miner brothers.

X-ray pulled Wheeljack over to one of the mid-height ones and turned on the water. He waited a moment to let it warm up before gently pushing the Wrecker under the spray. Humming in pleasant approval, Wheeljack closed his optics and visibly relaxed as most of the dirt and grime was washed off his frame.

“Here.”

He opened his optics to see that X-ray was handing him a soap covered cloth. Wheeljack stepped out from under the spray and accepted the cloth.

“You work on your front and I’ll do your back,” X-ray said as he grabbed a second cloth and put soap on it.

“Are you going to wash too?” Wheeljack started working on his chest.

“I might as well while I’m here.” X-ray stepped halfway into the spray, letting the warm water run over his back while he wiped down Wheeljack’s neck and shoulders. “You don’t mind returning the favor, do you?”

“Of course not.”

X-ray worked quickly around the sword hilts sticking out of the Wrecker’s back and moved on to his winglets. It didn’t escape his notice that Wheeljack had gone still as he carefully wiped them off.

“Sensitive?”

“A little…” But his vents hitched and he shivered when X-ray ran a cloth covered digit along the bottom edge of one winglet.

X-ray smirked. “I see.”

“Frag you!” Wheeljack growled as he continued washing again.

The blue mech laughed. “Maybe later.”

Wheeljack humphed.

“Alright. Finished with your back. Do your legs and then you can wash my back.” X-ray stepped fully under the spray of still warm water to rinse off any excess dust before he started sudsing his own chassis.

Wheeljack shot a glare at him. “Don't get used to giving me orders, X.”

“Ha. Those weren't orders, Short Stuff. Merely suggestions.”
Wheeljack quickly finish his legs and then helped X-ray with his back. He wasn’t lucky enough to find any sensitive parts like X-ray had on him. Or if he did, X-ray was very good at not letting him know it. Once he was done, he rinsed off under the spray while X-ray turned on the shower next to his to rinse off as well.

In the room next door, there were air dryers and towels. As well as buffers and wax. By the time X-ray led Wheeljack out of the washracks, they were both gleaming like new mechs.

“And you guys pamper yourselves like this all the time?”

“Like Knock Out, we understand the importance of a well-kept finish. We just don’t obsess over it.” X-ray laughed at Wheeljack’s skeptical look. “Kidding. I usually just wax for special occasions. Since I’m an engineer, I’m often messing up my finish when I’m working so I don’t bother waxing most of the time.”

“That reminds me… we hardly know anything about each other.”

“I know what you did. During the war at least. I, uh, asked Tango to pull up your public service record. It was quite an interesting read.”

“That puts you one up on me. All I know about your past is that you used to be a vehicon. Though I still kinda find that hard to believe.”

“I’ll have to show you the vids at some point. From when I first joined, before my frame was modified.” X-ray chuckled.

“What’s so funny?”

“I just realized that once upon a time I was shorter than you.”

Wheeljack scowled up at him.

“There you guys are!”

They looked up as they entered the main hall and saw Hirry coming toward them.

“So, is it true? Are you two really a couple?” she asked.

They looked at each other. Wheeljack grabbed X-ray’s servo, interlocking their digits as he raised it and planted a kiss on the back.

“Yes, we are,” Wheeljack said with a grin as a blush spread slightly across X-ray’s faceplates.

“And I see you went to the washracks. The twins thought you went to ‘get a room’.”

“We’re gonna wait on that for a little while. Besides, somebody said something about high grade,” Wheeljack admitted.

Hirry laughed heartily. “That we do have. Come on.” She turned to lead the way. Upon entering the rec room, she shouted, “The boyfriends have arrived!”

There were loud cheers and whistles as Wheeljack and X-ray entered servo in servo.

Leecher came up to them with Liliy on their shoulder. “By the way, Wheeljack,” Liliy spoke in serious tone. “You break his spark, you better run for the stars ‘cause there isn’t a place on this planet we won’t find you.”
“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Good, Quebec!” Liliy suddenly shouted at the mech across the room. “A round of Red Scythes for the happy couple!”

“Coming right up, Ma’am!” Quebec called back.

“What is it?” Wheeljack asked as X-ray led him around the tables and back to the bar where the two-tone blue flyer was preparing the drinks.

Two Cybertronian sized shot glasses clicked on the bar top. They were both filled with a bright green, glowing liquid. Then a splash of Red En was added to each. Quebec slid the glasses over to the two mechs as they approached.

“Red Scythe. Quebec named it after the Madam.” X-ray raised the glass. “To us.”

Wheeljack picked up the other one. “To us.”

They threw back the shots.

Wheeljack let out a strangled noise as he slammed the glass down. “What in the Pit was that!?” It burned all the way down to his tank. X-ray appeared to be handling it a little better than him though.

“Twice distilled synthetic energon and a splash of high grade Red,” explained Quebec. “Leaves a nasty burn, just like the Madam.”

Julian came up and handed him and X-ray another drink. “Here. This’ll help.”

Wheeljack accepted the half cube of mid-grade and took a sip. The burning in his tank eased a bit.

“Finish that,” Quebec pointed at the cube in his servo, “and then you can have a cube of regular high grade. You don’t want to mix a Red Scythe with anything else.”

“He’s speaking from experience,” Julian added.

Sipping the mid-grade, X-ray turned to Liliy. “So, Madam, what else are we celebrating?”

“The twins are no longer grounded.” Said twins whooped behind her. “Julian is also cleared for duty.” Liliy nodded at the other femme. “Oscar and Tango are on the mend. And I thought it would be good for everyone just to relax.”

Romeo sidled up to Delta. “Since X-ray’s dating Wheeljack, now you have to go see Boulder.” And gave him a slap on the back.

Delta was trying to take a drink and ended up spilling some of it down his front. He turned a glare on Romeo. “Do you mind?”

Romeo raised his servos in surrender. “Sorry, sorry.” He pulled a cloth from his subspace and handed to Delta.

Still glaring, Delta snatched the cloth from his servo and started cleaning up the mess on his plating.
Romeo sat down in the seat next to him. “But really. You can’t use the ‘he’s an Autobot’ excuse anymore.”

Delta sighed. “I know.”

“Looks like X-ray’s teaching Wheeljack some dance moves.”

In the open area between the tables and the gaming area, X-ray was dancing to the music while Wheeljack watched, optics following every move. X-ray moved in close and grabbed Wheeljack’s servo and pulled him out into the middle to dance with him.

Romeo turned from watching them and grinned. “Hey, Delta, you wanna dance with me?”

“Not after you made me spill my high grade.” Delta threw the cloth at Romeo’s face and got up to go to the bar.

Romeo caught the cloth as it fell from his faceplates. “Well, I tried.”
{DC squad, an escape pod crash landed near your patrol area. Your orders are to investigate. DA and DB squads are enroute to assist you. Confirm command.}

“Command confirmed. DC squad changing course to investigate.”

Raf was scrolling thru conspiracy sites on the internet looking for pictures of the Bots and scrubbing them. Most of the pictures were of Bumblebee but there were occasionally a few of Bulkhead and Arcee as well. He had yet to see one of Optimus. And Ratchet hardly ever left the base.

“Wait. What’s that?” asked Jack.

The older boy was sitting next to him on the couch while he was doing his daily search. The picture he pointed at was the latest post on the site after Raf had refreshed the page. The picture was titled ‘Mystery Meteor’ and was captioned with ‘Fall point is where?’. The picture itself was of something streaking across the evening sky over a forest. Raf highlighted the object and zoomed in.

“A Cybertronian escape pod…?” Raf said.

“Here in Earth’s atmosphere?” asked Ratchet from where he stood at the main console.

Raf sent the picture to Ratchet’s monitor. It certainly looked like an escape pod but the image was of poor quality.

“Autobot or Decepticon?” asked Arcee.

“Impossible to tell given the image resolution,” replied Ratchet.

“In any event, this merits investigation.” Optimus moved up to the comm. “Omega One to Rebel Base.”


Optimus recognized the voice of the miner. “Mike, can you tell us if there are any new Cybertronians on the planet?”

{Hmm... Yes, there is one. Landed less than an hour ago. Unconfirmed faction. Would you like the coordinates?]

“Yes, please.”
The coordinates appeared on the monitor.

{I sent them to you. Also, be careful. It seems the Cons are moving too. Mike out.} The link terminated.

“Since it is an unconfirmed faction, there may be an Autobot in distress,” said Optimus. “Ratchet, bring your medical kit.”

They came out of the ground bridge on a ridge overlooking the crash site. It was in a forest. The pod had knocked down several trees when it plowed into the earth, leaving a large trail of energon in its wake. The pod itself had a big hole in the side of it where the occupant had forced their way out. But that was not the cause for concern.

The cause for concern was the three squads of eradicons currently locked in a fire fight with a lone mech who was using some fallen trees and a boulder for cover.

“Looks like Optimus was right,” commented Bulkhead.

“But it could also be another trap,” countered Arcee.

“There is only one way to find out,” said Optimus, his servo changing into a blaster. “Autobots, roll out!”

The four Autobots with blasters leapt down the side of the ridge while opening fire on the Cons. Ratchet followed at a slightly slower pace since he was only there as backup.

Ucon looked up as more blaster fire rained down on them from above.

[Whiskey! It’s Team Prime!] he sent across their bond.

Whiskey seemed annoyed and angry. [I can see that!]

Ucon suddenly flinched as a few bolts headed his way. But they burst on something invisible before they reached him.

“Don’t worry, Spark.” Whiskey’s voice was a lot closer than Ucon expected, meaning he was facing him. “I’ll protect you.”

“That didn’t hurt you, did it?” he asked.

“My armor is a lot thicker than yours,” Whiskey said as he turned. He added a command across their bond. [Just stay behind me and you’ll be fine.]

“But-” Ucon was more concerned about the other members of his squad.

[Stay behind me!] Whiskey insisted.

The Autobots had finally reached ground level. Bulkhead rushed forward to engage the closest eradicons with his mace.

Ucon looked around. The Autobots were hardly holding back at all.
[The Madam did go and talk to the Autobots, right?] he asked.

[Yes. But they only promised to try to hold back.] Ucon’s concern was irritating him.

[So much for their promises.] His side of the bond was angry. [Show me your outline. I don’t want to accidentally shoot you.]

Whiskey’s outline appeared on his visor.

[Can you crouch? I need to use your shoulder.]

The outlined mech went down on one knee. Ucon rested his arm on Whiskey’s shoulder as he took careful aim at Arcee, his visor flickering to a deeper shade of red so he could correct faster. Three low powered blasts knocked her arm blade off course and it scratched harmless across DB-07’s armor rather than slicing thru her neck cables. He managed to divert Optimus’ blade next. The second time it happened, the Autobot leader looked over see where the shots were coming from. He spotted Ucon and pointed his blaster at him. But Ucon suddenly raised his blaster because Whiskey had stood up in front of him to take Prime’s shot. Optimus hesitated at that movement and hesitated even longer when Ucon looked away from him.

Ucon’s focus was suddenly on Bulkhead who was fighting with DC-08. He saw the way the wrecker shifted his weight, bringing his arm back for a strike that would probably at the very least severely cripple DC-08. He hesitated for a second, knowing that Whiskey would be mad at him for leaving his side.

“Ucon-?” Whiskey noticed the change in his partner an astroclick too late. Ucon was already moving.

However, Ucon miscalculated the speed of Bulkhead’s swing. He thought he heard someone scream his name but it was hard to tell over the sound of his frame being crushed between the wrecker’s mace and the boulder. All he knew was that he had pushed DC-08 out of the way in time. He coughed, filling the inside of his mask with energon from his internal bleeding. He turned his helm and saw Whiskey rushing toward him but his vision was blurring fast. He wanted to reach for his partner but his frame didn’t want to listen anymore.

The sheer volume of Whiskey’s scream had startled everyone in the area and all fighting came to a halt. Bulkhead was also surprised by the second eradicon appearing out of nowhere to push the first out of the way. There was a sickening crunch as his mace collided with the smaller frame, smashing it against the boulder. The eradicon coughed, an odd colored energon seeping out of the edges of his mask.

Whiskey screamed Ucon’s name when he realized that his partner was in danger. But he was too late. The sudden flare of pain across their bond cause him to stumble but he managed to keep his pedes under him as he ran forward, no longer invisible. He needed to get to Ucon. He could feel him fading. Ucon turned his helm to look at him. He saw Ucon’s servo move as if he was trying to reach for him but then his frame slumped and even his paintjob faded to his usual matte black and his visor went dark.

Whiskey roared with rage as he rushed at Bulkhead. He caught the offending arm of the surprised wrecker and wrenched hard. Bulkhead screamed in pain but Whiskey did not stop. He grabbed him
by the wheels on his back and, with a mighty heave, threw him across the battlefield. The big,
green mech collided with Optimus and sent them both sprawling.

Not caring what happened to the Autobot after he released him, Whiskey immediately knelt at
Ucon’s side and pulled off the energon soaked mask.

“Ucon! Spark, please! Stay with me!” he cried as he cradled his partner’s helm.

Ucon’s optics flicked and his mouth moved but no sound came out.

A ground bridge appeared. Foxtrot, Seaser, who was filling in for Oscar, and Leecher arrived.
Whiskey moved out of the medics’ way. He watched them for a moment with clenched fists, his
spark aching at the mangled sight of his partner. Rage welled up in him again and he whirled
around to face the Autobots.

Optimus was back on his pedes but Bulkhead was still on the ground. Ratchet was beside him,
checking his arm. Arcee and Bumblebee were on guard.

“She warned you, didn’t she?” he snarled at them, one servo transforming into a blaster. “SHE
WARNING YOU WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF YOU DIDN’T HOLD BACK!”

“Whiskey!” Leecher’s servo caught his blaster arm before he could raise it. “That’s enough!”

Visor flashing, Whiskey glared down at the smaller mech. Leecher tighten their grip on his arm in
a silent warning.

“It’s no good, Commander,” Foxtrot suddenly called. “We can’t stabilize him.”

Leecher was already moving. The next words out of their vocalizer were ones that only Whiskey
and the medics understood for they were in Lassic, Liliy’s native language. “Prepare for a spark
transplant then.”

It was an odd sight to the others there. Leecher laid across Ucon’s broken frame after the medics
pried open his chassis and exposed his dimming spark. Leecher’s chestplates had been open as well
but there did not appear to be any light within. The light was gone from Ucon’s chassis when
Leecher finally pushed off him, their chestplates sliding shut as they did.

Foxtrot leaned closer as Leecher sat back on their heels and whispered, “Is he stable?”

“For now,” Leecher replied in the same quiet tone, their visor dimming as they diverted most of
their power to keeping the foreign spark inside their chassis alive. “But we should get him back as
soon as possible. However…” They glanced at all the bots that were still gathered.

The Autobots were bunched together with the new mech hovering close to them while the
eradicons were spread out, unsure of what to do. Leecher turned to the eradicon who was still close
by, the one Ucon saved. He was sitting on the ground, watching them.

“You.” The eradicon flinched almost violently when he became the center of their attention.
“What’s your designation?”

“I-it’s DC-08, s-sir,” he answered shakily.

Leecher tilted their helm. “Just DC-08?”
He nodded. “Y-yes, s-sir.”

“Well, DC-08, the mech who was in the escape pod is obviously an Autobot so there is no need for the eradicons to be here anymore. You and yours should go.”

“B-but the A-autobots are right t-there. We have to f-fight them.”

Whiskey suddenly stepped forward. He grabbed the frightened eradicon by his shoulder and easily lifted him off the ground.

“Do you want to end up like him?” he growled, pointing at Ucon’s corpse. He gave the eradicon a little shake. “Huh?”

“N-no, s-sir,” DC-08 squeaked.

Whiskey turned and tossed him to the ground so he was closer to the rest of his squad.

“Well, that’s what’s gonna happen if you guys continue this fight. Don’t let DC-09’s sacrifice be in vain.” He looked around at the others to make sure they were listening. “I suggest you all get lost while you still can.”

The eradicons looked at each other, still unsure of what to do. Finally DA-01 stepped forward.

“He’s right. It is pointless to continue this battle when there is nothing to be gained but more casualties.”

“But, Dane-” one of the others protested.

DA-01 held up his servo to quiet the others. He focused on Leecher. “First, please answer my question.”

“What is it?”

“Is DC-09 really dead?”

“Yes,” Leecher replied. “The mech known as DC-09, formally ZZ-05, is dead.”

“I see... Thank you for indulging my request. We will now return to the Nemesis.” He turned to the other eradicons. “All squads move out!”

All the eradicons transformed and flew away.

Leecher sighed. “They left their wounded behind again. Foxtrot, Seasar.”

“Yes, Commander.”

The two medics’ visors flickered to red before they disappeared. There was a started cry among the thicket not too far away. The medics returned after a moment, each with an unconscious eradicon over their shoulders.

“I see. Not that injured, huh?” asked Leecher.

“Nothing life-threatening. Mostly just unable to transform.”

“That’s good. Only one real casualty then. Whiskey, if you please.”
Whiskey helped Leecher to their pedes. They leaned on Seasar for support while Whiskey gathered Ucon's corpse into his arms. The ground bridge reappeared.

“Let's go.”

The new mech had stopped firing when the Autobots arrived. He watched in awe at their ferocity as they engaged the enemy despite being outnumbered.

Then everything ground to a screeching halt when someone screamed a name. Optimus knew that kind of scream all too well. The sound of bot seeing their partner fall on the battlefield. He had heard it many times over the years, though it had become less and less frequent as the war dragged on. That is why it must have surprised everyone.

Optimus realized what had happened when he saw Whiskey materialize and rush at Bulkhead. He moved forward, hoping to stop the brown and gold mech but he was too late. Bulkhead screamed in pain and then he was suddenly flying at Optimus. The Prime hit the ground hard with the wrecker on top of him.

The other Autobots were trying to get the disoriented Bulkhead off him, so he did not see the other CRC members arrive. But the medics were already working the eradicon that Bulkhead had hit when Optimus finally got his pedes under him again.

Whiskey whirled on them. Optimus could sense the raging hatred from where he stood.

“SHE WARNED YOU WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF YOU DIDN’T HOLD BACK!”

Yes, Liliy had. But the Autobots had failed to listen, had forgotten their promise. Optimus feared that the mech was going to attack again when he brought out his blaster but Leecher stopped him. For the Autobots’ sake, Optimus hoped that the eradicon would live, but when the medics called to Leecher, he thought all hope was lost.

However, Leecher moved, uttering a command that set the medics working again. When Leecher laid across the broken frame, chassis open, spark exposed, Optimus remembered what Liliy had told him about Leecher. They were just sparkless armor that needed a pilot. It was hard to believe then but now, seeing the blink of light pass between the two frames, how eerily dull and lifeless the eradicon became just before Leecher lifted off him, he was sure that they were using the armor to keep the spark alive.

Leecher remained seated on the ground, visor dim. They looked around before addressing the other eradicon that was still near them. There was an exchange of words with the eradicons, convincing them that there was no longer a need to fight. And, much to the surprise of the Autobots, they did leave.

There was a brief moment in which the medics disappeared. There was a startled cry from a thicket nearby in that time too. And then the medics came back with a couple eradicons. Whiskey helped Leecher stand and they used one of the medics for support while Whiskey collected the eradicon’s corpse. When a ground bridge opened, Optimus realized they were going to leave without a word.

“Leecher!” he suddenly called out.

His private comm pinged as the CRC members disappeared.

{We will talk about this later, Optimus Prime.} Liliy’s voice was so icy that Optimus felt a chill
ran thru his frame. **(Right now, there is a spark in need of a new frame.)**

Optimus flinched slightly at the audible termination of the commlink. Sighing, he turned finally to his Autobots.

"Ratchet, how is Bulkhead?"

"The damage to his arm is fixable," Ratchet replied.

"We screwed up big time, didn’t we?" asked Bulkhead, looking up at Optimus from where he sat. Optimus just nodded.

"Serves them right," growled the medic.

"Ratchet..."

"Uhm, excuse me." They all looked at the white and blue mech from the escape pod. “Sorry to interrupt but I can’t hold it in anymore. I can’t believe I ended up on the same planet as the Optimus Prime! Wow!”

"What is your name, soldier?"

The mech snapped to attention and saluted. “Smokescreen, sir!”

"Welcome to Earth, Smokescreen.”

"Hey, where’s DC-09?" someone asked.

"He’s dead," DC-10 replied wearily, not bothering looking up to see who was speaking. He didn’t really want to talk to anyone right now.

"What?!" they gasped.

"No way!" someone else exclaimed.

"Are you sure?" a third person asked.

That was a voice he immediately recognized. DC-10 looked up. It was his former squadmate ZX-02. With him was two of the other Z squad members that ZZ-05 used to sit with while on break. He looked down at his pedes again.

"Yes. I saw his corpse myself.”

Breakdown paused when he glimpsed an eradicon hiding in the back a supply room.

"Zuza?" he asked, recognizing the mech as ZZ-04 as he approached. “What are you doing back here?” He noticed the mech was shaking. “Hey… Are you crying? What’s wrong?”

"H-he didn’t come b-back,” Zuza replied between sobs.

Breakdown knelt beside him and laid a comforting servo on his shoulder. “Who didn’t come back?”
“DC-09. I mean I-I know that it i-is c-common for the c-combat troops not to… not to c-come back, b-but it s-still hurts, kn-knowing that h-he’s gone. He w-was my f-friend.”

Breakdown was shocked. He had no idea. “DC-09 didn’t come back from his last mission?”

Zuza looked up at him. “You haven’t h-heard? Everyone is t-talking about it.”

“No. I hadn’t heard, but that explains the mood around the ship. The other officers probably haven’t noticed. Did you hear how it happened?”

“A-apparently, he took a hit for DC-08.”

“Sacrificed himself for someone else…” Breakdown mused. “That sounds like him.” He gave Zuza’s shoulder a gentle squeeze. “Hey, don’t stay back here too long, ok, Zuza? I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“Y-yes, sir.”

Breakdown left the supply room and quickly went in search of the eradicon Zuza mentioned.

“DC-08,” he called out when he spotted him in the hallway.

The mech jerked to attention and faced Breakdown. “Yes, sir?”

“Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Uh, yes, sir.”

Breakdown pulled the eradicon aside. “Please tell me about your last mission.”

DC-08 stared at him. “Sir?”

“I want to know how ZZ-I mean DC-09 died.”

“Yes, sir.” DC-08 told him everything. “And then we left. But it seems we left DA-02 and DB-07 behind as well.”

“I see. Thank you for telling me. I am sorry for holding you up.”

“It’s fine, sir. I will be going back now.”

Breakdown nodded. He watched the back of the retreating eradicon until he disappeared around the corner. Then he turned on his heel and headed for the medbay.

“Hey, Knock Out,” Breakdown said quietly as he entered the medbay.

“What’s wrong, Break’?” Knock Out looked up at the blue mech. He could tell his partner was upset about something.

Breakdown shrugged. “You wanna go for a drive for a bit?”

So it was something they couldn’t talk about on the ship. That was fine. Knock Out never minded going for a drive. “Sure.”
However, Knock Out didn’t expect to end up outside Jasper, Nevada again. He kept stealing glances at Breakdown but the blue mech was staying quiet. After a little while, Knock Out caught the sound of a high-pitched engine approaching them. Breakdown pulled over to the side of the road.

“Breakdown, what are you doing?” Knock Out asked, following his partner’s example.

Breakdown still did not answer him as the other car approached. It was dark red speedster. They were almost on top of them before they braked hard and transformed, leaping into the air. The mech landed gracefully on his pedes.

“You guys have some nerve, showing up in a place like this again,” he said, putting his servos on his hips.

Recognizing him, Breakdown transformed as well. “Is Tango busy?”

“No,” Romeo replied, pushing up his mask. “He’s just still restricted to base because the medics haven’t cleared him to transform yet.”

Breakdown started. “What happened?”

Knock Out transformed then and asked with concern. “Was he hurt?”

The corner of Romeo’s mouth turned up, amused at their worrying. “He had a little run-in with Starscream but he and Oscar are on the mend.”

Knock Out’s optics narrowed. “With Starscream?”

Romeo nodded. “It’s a long story, but that’s not why you’re here,” he looked at Breakdown, “is it?”

“No,” Breakdown replied.

“I thought so. You want to know about the eradicon.”

“...Yes.”

Romeo sighed. “For all accounts and purposes, the eradicon you knew as DC-09, formally ZZ-05, is dead.”

“But his spark wasn’t extinguished?” Breakdown asked.

“No. The medics simply put him into a new frame.”

“A spark transplant?” Knock Out inquired. “You had a spare frame just laying around?”

“Why are you surprised?” Romeo replied. “You guys are the one fighting the war and making all the corpses.”

“And they used to say I was barbaric for using parts from the dead to fix the living,” Knock Out mumbled.

Romeo still heard him though. One optic ridge rose. “Used to? They don’t anymore?”

Knock Out huffed. “Because everyone who used to do it is now dead.”
“I suppose that makes sense. Is that all you wanted to know then?” Romeo asked Breakdown. “If he was really dead or not?”

“What is his real designation?” Breakdown wanted to know.

“Ah. I’ll leave that to him to tell you.”

“Speaking of names,” Knock Out suddenly piped up, “is there a medic called Fritz in your group?”

“Now that’s a name I haven’t heard in a while…” Romeo chuckled. “Technically, yes. But he hasn’t gone by that name for at least a hundred years. You’ve met him actually. The medic that was with me in the mine.”

“You mean that time that Ratchet showed up and punched Megatron in the face and then you shot me.”

Romeo raised an optic ridge again. “That’s what you remember from that time?”

“Well, I remember that medic too. But is he the one who taught the eradicon first aid?”

“Huh? First aid? No. That was the commander. They made sure we all knew it.”

“Your commander?”

“Yeah. They’re kind of a jack-of-all-trades. They let us do the specializing.”

“And what do you specialize in?”

“Surveillance.”

“What kinda specialization is that?”

“Field work. You could say, the Surveillance Team are the first responders. The soldiers who had no interest in a particular profession that would benefit the team.”

Starscream had finally made it back to land. Stowing the Apex Armor for later, he grumbled as he continued walking. He barely glanced up as he passed under the stone arch and entered the canyon. Eventually, he rounded a corner and found what he was looking for. The remains of a wrecked spaceship nestled against the side of the canyon, forgotten by everyone once again since the Immobilizer incident. Everyone but Starscream.

“Ah, Just as I left it. The Harbinger. Things are beginning to look up.”

Starscream made his way on board and immediately started searching for anything useful. He searched for a long while but hardly found a thing. Incredibly frustrated, he kicked over the crate he had been going through, scattering the contents across the floor.

“Really!? Not one scrap of energon!” he growled, slamming his fist against the wall.

Mechanisms creaked in the wall. A lock released and a door opened behind him. Curious, he stepped back to look inside this new room. He didn’t notice anything suspicious so he stepped inside.

“A laboratory…?” he said, recognizing a bit of the equipment. He approached the console in the
middle of the floor and tapped a key. It responded, the small monitor lighting up. “And it’s functional.”

Tapping a few more keys, he managed to divert some power to the surrounding lab equipment. Lights clicked on on the wall before him, revealing five white but armorless bodies.

“Protoforms…”

Curious, Starscream started scanning the data on the monitor.

“Let’s see. Transference of binary bonding. Sub molecular infusion. The formulas seem straightforward enough. Well, my little lumps of clay, you look like you’re right for the molding. Let’s give cloning a whirl shall we?”

He extracted some of his energon and inserted into the machine. The computer analyzed and decoded his CNA. He laughed maniacally as the cloning equipment around him sparked and crackled with electricity.

“GIVE ME LIFE!” he shouted over the noise, pulling the lever to start the cloning process.

More arcs danced around the lab and over the protoforms as his CNA was poured into them and they took shape. Only a minute passed before there were five exact copies of him. Sparks still flew around as the equipment shut down.

“Ahh. Like minded company. At last! Well now,” he mused at he looked them over. “What to do with you?”

“We are at your command, commander,” replied the closest clone, startling him a bit.

“What shall we do first?” asked the second.

“Kill Megatron and take over the Decepticons?” suggested the third.

“Take revenge on the Autobots?” said the fourth.

“Or perhaps the annoying neutral scum who dropped you into the sea?” added the last one.

“Uh. How did you know that?” Starscream wanted to know.

“We are as one, commander,” answered the last.

“We share your memories,” the first informed him.

“And your feelings,” said the third.

“...I see. Well, then you should know that I cannot transform at the moment so all your suggestions are useless. Unless one of you knows how to reactivate the t-cog protocols?” Starscream waved a servo at them.

They all shook their helms.

“Then the first thing we need to do is find someone who can so that I can fly too.”

“Who then?” asked the second.

“Knock Out?” the fourth offered.
“We could…” Starscream thought about it. “But there is a chance he might tell Megatron about us. Plus Soundwave is always monitoring Decepticon frequencies, he would definitely notice.”

“Then Ratchet perhaps?” suggested one.

“Perhaps,” said Starscream. “But he hardly leaves the Autobot base. And the last time I asked him to come alone, he didn’t listen.”

“Hmm…”

“Then that leaves the Neutrals,” concluded the third.

“Hmm. Yes. That might be the most logical choice. But how?”

“Call them?”

“No. That’d be too risky. It would be best if we could just find one alone.”

“Alone? But how? Do you want us to search the whole planet until we-”

An alarm sounded. Starscream hadn’t realized that he had activated it when he powered up the lab.

“It seems there is an intruder,” he informed the clones after pulling up the security footage. “And it seems that luck is on our side. She’s one of the Neutrals. Go now and bring her to me.”

“Yes sir.”

Seasar was surprised when she saw Starscream because he didn’t have a spark signal so she was slow in reacting when he fired a missile at her. She was able to dodge the missile itself but not the explosion when it hit the wall behind her. She was thrown across the hall and hit her helm hard. As she lost consciousness, she thought that maybe her optics or processor were damaged in the impact because now she saw three of him.

She found that that was not the case when she woke up again. There were six of him now. And one definitely had a spark signal. She was sitting on the floor in a lab with stasis cuffs on her wrists.

“I see. So you cloned yourself.” She looked pointedly at the original.

“How do you know I’m the real one?” Starscream demanded.

“You’re the only one with a spark signature,” she replied coolly.

“That doesn’t make the rest of us any less real,” one of the clones cried.

She nodded. “You’re right. It just makes you harder to track. So, what do you want with me?”

“I need you to reactivate my t-cog,” answered Starscream.

“No,” she said simply.

“No? Why not?” Starscream’s voice rose a bit.

She shrugged. “Because I don’t want to.”

“How do we even know she can do it?” asked one of the clones.
“If I remember correctly, you are one of the scientists,” said Starscream.

She nodded again. “Yes.”

“So that means you have medical knowledge too because your scientists also double as medics.”

“Correct. However, when it comes to the CRC, you don’t really need a medic,” Seasar explained. “Any member will do. Deactivating and reactivating a t-cog is basic first aid knowledge.”

“Why would that be basic first aid knowledge?” one of them asked.

“Why not?”

“Then can you teach us how to do it?” asked another.

“No.”

“Why not?” It was Starscream again.

“You should know why not,” she snapped, her calmness slipping for a moment. “Who receives help and then turns around and stabs their benefactors in the back?”

“I didn’t ask to be helped.”

“No. You’re just an ungrateful son of a glitch. You don’t deserve that t-cog or that leg you stand on!”

Starscream shot forward and grabbed her by the throat cables.

“I could kill you right now,” he warned, his clawed servo tightening.

If she was in pain, she did not show it. In fact, the calmness she displayed before was back. “Go ahead. But I warn you. The moment my spark is extinguished, they will come for you. And there is no place on this planet where you can escape from her wrath.”

Starscream smirked. “I have faced Megatron’s wrath many times. I’m not scared.”

“Trust me, Starscream. The burn of her blade as she draws it slowly across your armor is far worse than anything Megatron can throw at you. And she already has an optic on one of your wings since you nearly took off Tango’s.”

“And you know what it feels like?” Starscream asked, sounding oddly surprised. His grip on her neck even loosened a little.

“Not all of us were very accepting when we met her. I made the same mistake you did and hurt one of her mechs. And, well, by the time she was satisfied, I had to have some armor and a limb replaced.”

“And you still loyalty followed her?”

“Obviously not at first. Rebuilding trust takes time. I advise you to remember that.”

Optimus stood alone on top of their base watching the sunset. He turned at the sound of a ground bridge opening behind him. A matte black mech stepped and the portal closed.
“Leecher… I was expecting Liliy.”

The mask split open, revealing Liliy and Leech. “I’m here, Optimus.”

“So that really is just armor.”

“Yes.” The mask closed up and then Leecher transformed into their alt-mode. Liliy climbed out of the driver’s seat with Leech still attached to her shoulder. She shut the door and leaned back against the car while staring at the sunset.

Optimus waited for a minute but neither of them seemed inclined to speak so he carefully lower his frame to sit on the ground next to them.

“Are you angry?” he asked finally.

Leech’s yellow optics turned to look up at him. “Compared to what she felt toward Starscream, I would say she is only mildly upset at you and yours. But yes, her general emotion is currently anger. By the way, I am Leech, Liliy’s partner, living prosthetic, and the primary pilot of the Leecher armor.”

Optimus nodded in greeting. “What happened with Starscream?”

“Ah.” Leech raised a tail to the side of his speaker and spoke in a low voice after a quick glance at Liliy. “It’s best not to ask.”

Optimus nodded again. “What about the eradicon? Did he survive?”

Liliy spoke this time, her tone hard. “This conversation would be going very differently if he did not.”

“Yes, he did,” Leech quickly followed up. “We were able to stabilize his spark and get it into a new frame. But, unfortunately, this means we have lost our spy on the Nemesis.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Which brings us to another matter,” Leech continued. “After this incident, the ‘boys’ have gotten together and complained that the number of serious injuries has increased since we started actively helping your Autobots. They are requesting that Liliy withdraws from your base.”

“And how do you feel about this, Liliy?” asked Optimus, focusing on the Laserblade.

She sighed and actually glanced up at him for a moment. “It’s hard. I’ve come to think of you guys as family. But I also have a responsibility to my boys as well. I’m sure Ratchet will be glad to hear that I’m leaving.”

Optimus shifted. “I agree. Being a leader is very hard. And I am sorry to hear that you will be leaving us.”

“Don’t worry,” Leech said. “You can still count on us a little bit. Like if you are running low on supplies or if you need to find someone. Although, I think Pepper may be wanting to enlist your help soon, Optimus.”

He seemed surprised. “My help? Why?”

“He has been working on decoding the Iacon database from where you--Orion left off,” explained Leech. “So far he has been able to keep ahead of Soundwave who was doing the same but this last
entry, Soundwave showed up himself while we were in the process of digging up the relic. Thankfully, injuries were kept to a minimum because Wheeljack showed up.”

“Wheeljack? Is he alright?”

“Oh, yeah!” Leech waved off Optimus’ concern. “Apparently he really gave Soundwave a run for his money. Now he’s been staying with us ‘cause he and X-ray started dating.”

“Him and X-ray? Well, they did seem to work well together.” He smiled a little. “Good for them. But back to the Iacon database… how many entries has Pepper decoded?”

“Four so far.”

“Four??” Optimus interrupted. “You have uncovered four Iacon relics and yet we did not pick up a single one of their signals?”

“We used signal jammers when we went to dig them up. Though, I wonder if that one on the Tox-En even worked. The container was sitting out in the open when the ‘boys’ found it.”

Optimus started. “Tox-En?”

“Don’t worry. No one was infected and we made sure to destroy it.”

“What were the other three relics?” he asked.

“There was the phase-shifter,” said Leech.

“Which we still have,” Liliy added.

“Right. The Resonance Blaster.”

“Which Soundwave got away with.”

“And the Apex Armor,” Leech concluded.

“What happened to it?” Optimus asked when Liliy didn’t seem too inclined to add.

It was Leech who answered in a grave tone. “Starscream took it.”

“And he is going to pay for it!” Liliy growled, slamming her fist against the car door behind them. While her fist did not leave a dent, the car did rock heavily on its tires. Leech reached around and caught her wrist so she wouldn’t punch the car again.

“Easy, Lil’.” At Optimus’ questioning look, Leech explained. “He didn’t just take it. He put two of our mechs in the medbay with serious injuries. Also, did you forget that we uncovered two of the three relics that you--Orion decoded? You probably didn’t pick up their signals either.”

“That’s true.” After a brief pause, he spoke again. “Liliy, I know I’m not the one you want to hear this from but revenge only makes things worse.”

“You’re right,” she growled, glaring up at him. “I don’t want to hear that from you. Be grateful I like you, otherwise Bulkhead wouldn’t’ve gotten off so easily.”

Optimus sighed. “Perhaps it is a good thing you are leaving us.”

“Yes,” Leech agreed. “We should go and get your things, Liliy.”
Liliy nodded and the next thing Optimus knew, she and Leech were over by the human sized door that led to the elevator into the base. With another sigh, Optimus picked himself up out of the dirt and headed inside as well.

By the time he made it back to the main room, Liliy was heading back into the elevator to leave.

“See ya ‘round, O.P.,” she said just before the door closed on her.

“What was that about?”

Optimus turned and looked at Ratchet who was just coming back from a trip to the supply room judging by the box in his servos.

“She did not talk to you?” Optimus asked, a little surprised.

Ratchet frowned. “No. I didn’t even know she was here.” He moved past Optimus and set the box down on his work table.

“She left.”

Ratchet looked up at him. “Left as in…?”

“She took her things and she won’t be coming back.”

“Finally!” The medic practically whooped.

“Ratchet. Admit it, you’ll miss her.”

Probably but no way was he going to admit it. “About as much as I miss the scraplets.”

“Ratchet!” His tone was a bit exasperated and a bit resigned.

Ratchet turned to his work table and started going thru the box. “But the children will miss her.”

Optimus stared at the medic’s back. “...Yes. Yes, they will.”

He glanced up at the human’s rec area and noticed three poster sized pads of paper leaning against the entertainment center. Each one had one of the children's names on it. Curious, he moved over to the rec area and picked up the one labeled with Raf’s name. He very carefully flipped thru it. Pictures, all hand drawn or painted, of Raf and Bumblebee. Some were just the two of them. Some included various other members of Team Prime. All of them were good or happy memories.

Optimus smiled as he replaced the pad.

“What are those?” asked Ratchet, glancing up at him.

“Gifts for the children. From Liliy.”

Ratchet just humphed and returned to his work.

With a knowing smile, Optimus disappeared down the hall to his room. He was utterly surprised when he entered and found another large pad of paper with his name on it. Except it was a bit larger than the ones left for the children.

‘Thanks for all the memories.’ was written on the first page. He flipped thru the pages. The first
half was him with his team. Then he paused on a picture of himself with Lily sitting his shoulder in her human form. He appeared to be having a conversation with her but there was something off about him. He realized it was his expression. The mech in the picture looked… Confused. Innocent? Less burdened. Nothing like the war-hardened leader he now was. He looked down at the caption.

‘Orion learning about Earth.’

Oh. A memory from his time on the Nemesis. No wonder it was unfamiliar. He was going to have to ask her about what happened again. She still hadn’t told him. But that could wait till later.

The last few pages were pictures from the time he spent with the CRC. He smiled at those memories as he flipped the pad closed and put it in a safe place.

Later, Ratchet also found a similar gift in his room. He grumbled about her sneaking into places she shouldn’t be but the pictures still made him smile fondly to himself.

Starscream stumbled thru the ground bridge. He came out in the hallway outside the lab. He looked down at the small cluster of red energon in his servo. He had managed to secure it but it also cost him the Apex Armor and both the clones that were with him. Plus he had probably failed to destroy the rest of the red energon.

Speaking of clones, the lab was strangely quiet. There was also the smell of something burnt in the air. Cautiously, he crept to the door and peeked inside. It was mostly dark but he could make out the silhouette of one of the clones in the glow of the ship’s biolights. He stepped into the room.

“Hey, why are the-!!” The lights came on, cutting him off with a gruesome scene. He gagged, one servo covering his mouth. But the carnage was too much. Dropping the red energon, he turned and fell to his knees, purging the remains of his last refuel all over the floor.

One of the clones was strung up by their wrists, back facing the door so that Starscream could see the hole pierced in their back, slightly right of the spinal strut, and the wing that looked like it had been wrenched and was barely hanging on. There were even dents in the wing from the assailant’s digits. The other wing was in a stiff, upright position and there was a vaguely familiar crest burned into it. Energon streaked down the clone’s back and still dripped off the left ped. The right ped half lay in the pool of energon beneath the clone, the ankle twisted awkwardly while the rest of the leg dangled from some wires and tubes, the inner strut having been snapped off just below the hip joint.

There was another clone on the floor next to the first. At first glance, it appeared that this one had simply been sliced down the middle by an energy blade of some sort, a terrified expression forever frozen on both halves of their face. A closer look, however, revealed that the right leg had also been mostly severed from the body, just below the hip joint.

The remaining clone lay face down on the other side of the first one. Their wings and winglets had been cut off. Along with all their limbs save for the left arm. The wings and limbs were in pieces around the body as if they had been cut off a piece at a time.

The remaining servo of this last clone twitched at the sound of Starscream purging his tanks. The clone’s helm turned. The impossibly dim optics barely opened. The quiet, static laced
'Commander?' scared poor Starscream so bad he screamed and scrambled back. Venting hard, he stared at the mostly limbless clone, unsure of if he had really heard them speak. The servo twitched again, reaching for him slightly.

“Commander?” they managed again.

Starscream crawled forward on his servos and knees and gently took the reaching servo in his own. “I’m here.”

The helm turned toward him, the optics opening a little wider. “Commander, I’m sorry.”

“Who did this to you?” Starscream demanded. “Was it the femme?”

“No—” The voicebox fritz out and it took longer than normal for them to reset it. “…No. It was her commander… black… frame similar to a vehicon… moved like the wind… they said that if you… if you ever hurt one of theirs’ again… it will be you next time…” They burst static that almost sounded like a laugh. “…She was right… the burn of the blade was worse… worse than anything you ever imagined…” Their voice trailed off.

Their servo squeezed his own for a moment before going limp. The dim light in their optics died as their life force went out. Starscream let go of the servo and looked up at the knife-like crest on the first clone’s wing. He had seen it on a few of the Neutrals. He wondered if it was their symbol. But he also felt he had seen it somewhere else, a long, long time ago, back on Cybertron.

Starscream glanced over at the red energon. These clones weren’t the only ones taken by the Neutrals that evening. He had taken the other two clones with him when he went to investigate the red energon sighting they had found on the humans’ internet. There they encountered the Autobots who were doing the same. Just as they managed to corner the Autobots, however, the Gulf twins showed up and took out the clones instantly. Since Starscream was wearing the Apex Armor, he was able to stand his ground against all of them. It was then that the Bots’ newest recruit, a grounder Starscream had never seen before, said he might be able to defeat him if he had a phase-shifter. And just like that, another of the Neutrals’ flyers appeared out of a ground bridge with said tech. Sure enough, the young Autobot was able to kick Starscream out of the Apex Armor using the phase-shifter. Even though he was a bit shocked that the mech’s plan actually worked, he managed to keep his wits about him and fired both of his rockets at the red energon crystals that the Autobots were guarding. He didn’t bother to stay to see if the rockets even hit the right mark. He grabbed the little bit of red energon he had managed to get his servos on and disappeared through his ground bridge, the sound of explosions following after him.

Starscream looked down at the corpse before him again and a realization struck him. *He was alone again.* The intensity of the realization combined with everything that had happened in the past several hours drew a sob from his frame. And they did not stop. Not caring anymore, he simply curled forward, frame shaking as he cried.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for taking so long. All the sites I’ve been posting this on are all caught up with each other so everybody have the same wait time now. Thanks for reading.
“Look out!”

Starscream fired his missiles. While everyone else dove aside expecting an explosion from the red energon, Echo stepped forward. Not only had he grabbed the phase-shifter for Smokescreen, but he brought the shield generator with him as well. He held it out in front of him and focused on what kind of shield he wanted it to generate. It responded instantly, creating a large concave shield. The missiles hit the shield and exploded, the shape of the shield directing the blast back toward Starscream. The flames subsided and Echo lowered the deactivated shield generator. Starscream was nowhere to be seen but Echo knew he had fled thru a ground bridge.

“Whoa! Now that was impressive!” exclaimed Smokescreen.

“You weren’t so bad yourself, Autobot,” replied Echo. He turned to the twins. “Golf, Indy, are those two still alive?” He gestured to the two clones Starscream had left behind.

“Hm. It’s harder to tell since they don’t have sparks, but yeah, it seems like they are,” answered Indy.

“Good. Bring them back with us.” Echo turned to Optimus. “And we’ll be taking the rest of the red energon as well. Unless, you desperately need it for something?”

Optimus shook his helm. “No. You can have it.”

“Thank you. In return, you can keep the Apex Armor and the phase-shifter. We have no use for them. And this as well.” Echo handed the shield generator over to Smokescreen who was closest to him.

“Are you sure?” asked Smokescreen.

“Quite certain,” replied Echo, going over to the storage container that the humans had been transporting the red energon in. There was a gaping hole in the side were Starscream had ripped it open but the three remaining clusters of crystals were undamaged. “This is more valuable to us than any of those items.”

“Out of curiosity,” Arcee spoke up. “Why is that?”
Echo’s gaze fell on her and she shifted uncomfortably, her armor clamping tight over her frame.

“Where do you think we got the red energon to power our hyperspeed mods up until now?”

She just shrugged and gestured vaguely.

It was Optimus who answered, his voice deep and unsettled. “Liliy.”

“Precisely. If we could find another source to draw from for a while, it would be better for her. Though, from what I’ve read, red energon is harder to process from its crystal form so I doubt we’ll get very much out of these.” He touched his comm. “Alfa, send me Kilo and Charlie. And if Pepper wants to meet with Optimus, now’s his chance.”

A moment later, a ground bridge opened.

“Why did you ask for me?” the femme grumbled as she stepped out of the portal followed by Kilo.

“Because we have a present for you.” Echo gestured to the container.

Charlie’s optics actually lit up at the sight of the crystals. Her tone much happier when she spoke. “My, Echo, you shouldn’t have. Kilo, please be a dear.”

Kilo rumbled a chuckle as he picked up the container. The twins were waiting by the ground bridge, each carrying one of Starscream’s clones over their shoulder. Charlie followed Kilo back through the portal. The twins threw a mock salute at the Autobots before they disappeared. Before Echo could follow however, Pepper came running out and almost collided with him.

“Oh, sorry, Echo.” Pepper nimbly sidestepped and moved around the flyer. “Optimus,” he called, coming up to the Prime. “The Madam told you I was decoding the Iacon database, right? I need your help.”

Echo shook his helm, amused by Pepper’s not-so-subtle excitement and disappeared through the portal, leaving the snow plow with the Autobots.

“To think that the CRC had the Iacon database and was decoding it this entire time,” grumbled Ratchet as he watched Optimus pour over and discuss the glyphs scrolling across the main monitors with the enthusiastic, neon yellow mech standing on the other side of them. “One more thing to be annoyed at Liliy for.”

“But at least they were trying to keep the relics out of Decepticon servos as much as we would have,” Arcee pointed out. “And in the end, they gave the relics they had to us.”

“Yeah, Ratch. You really need to stop hating on Liliy and her team so much,” added Bulkhead. “They’ve helped us a lot.”

“I can’t believe you can say that after they broke your arm, Bulkhead.”

“It could’ve been worse,” Pepper suddenly piped up. “The Madam has been known to lop limbs off for less.”

Ratchet whirled around to glare at Pepper. “She wouldn’t dare!”

“Well, not unless you outright became our enemies-This one here, Optimus.” He pointed a glyph for Optimus to highlight before addressing Ratchet again. “But she does try to reign in her temper
They were almost done with the next set of coordinates when the computer picked a beacon signal. The signal’s location came up on one of the monitors, interrupting the two mechs.

“Tch. Seems like Soundwave still beat us to the punch,” grumbled Pepper.

“Pepper, you remain here with Ratchet.” Optimus turned to look at the others who had gathered while Ratchet readied the ground bridge and Pepper came down to the main floor. “Where is Smokescreen?”

“Out training again with Jack,” answered Arcee.

“We cannot wait. Autobots, transform and roll out,” ordered Optimus.

With that, most of Team Prime transformed and disappeared thru the portal.

“While they are out in the field,” Ratchet said after he shut down the ground bridge, “I’ll need to use the computer to monitor them, so you’ll have to put your translating on hold.”

“No worries, Doc. I already linked it to this data pad so I won’t be in your way.” Pepper held up a data pad he pulled out of his subspace.

“My name is not Doc,” growled Ratchet.

“Alright. Geez. No wonder you don’t like the Madam,” said Pepper, leaning against the concrete tiers, out of Ratchet’s way. “You guys are a lot alike.”

“I am nothing like Lily,” Ratchet shot back.

“Short-tempered but also super caring.” He smirked as he continued the decoding on his data pad. “Yeah, you two aren’t alike at all.”

“Hmph.”

The computer beeped again.

“That’s strange,” mused Ratchet.

Pepper glanced up. “What is it?’’

Ratchet didn’t answer him, instead opening a comm to the Away Team. “Optimus, I just picked up a second Iacon locator beacon.”

No answer.

“Optimus? Do you read?”

More static.

Just then, Jack and Smokescreen came back, laughing about their latest prank.

“Will you two keep it down!” Ratchet snapped at them before going back to the comm. “Arcee? Bulkhead? Can anyone hear me?”
“Ratchet, what’s going on?” asked Jack.

“Our sensors detected a second Iacon locator beacon,” Ratchet explained, turning to them. “But I can’t reach Optimus.”

“I’ll go,” offered Smokescreen, suddenly serious.

“Alone?” Ratchet asked.

“Not alone,” Pepper interjected, stepping forward. He waved his data pad slightly. “I just finished decoding that set of coordinates Optimus and I were working on and they match those of the second beacon. The first beacon may be a decoy. You should keep trying to raise Optimus while Smokescreen and I go scout out the second site.” He put his data pad away and went to the ground bridge controls.

“Fine. But if Liliy gets mad-” Ratchet started.

Pepper cut him off. “Don’t worry. I’ll keep out of trouble.”

Pepper went through the ground bridge first. He turned to Smokescreen as the portal closed and saw that Jack was also there. He frowned.

“Why is the kid here too?”

Smokescreen shrugged. “I asked him to come along.”

Pepper’s optics narrowed farther in disapproval. “Stay close,” he said to Jack and snapped his mask down over his face.

“Let’s go grab a relic,” Smokescreen cheered, moving ahead.

“They’re not grabbing anything,” insisted Pepper, following him. Jack had to run to keep up with them. “This is a scouting mission. We’ll wait for Optimus before we strike.”

They peeked around some rocks and took in the scene. There were several vehicons with mining equipment gathered, some digging and some standing guard. Several insecticons were moving rocks. In the middle of it all was the relic stuck in the side of a giant boulder.

“Whoa. It’s a sword,” observed Jack.

“Not just any sword,” replied Smokescreen. “That looks like the Star Saber, a legendary weapon forged by Solus Prime... As lore would have it. It’s rumored to wield the power of the Matrix. I’m gonna make Optimus proud.”

“Sounds similar to a human legend I read once,” mused Pepper. “About another sword in a stone.”

“You mean the legend of King Arthur--wait,” Jack looked up at him. “You know about our old legends?”

“Of course. I’ve been on Earth since before that one was even told. I have quite the collection of human literature. Anyway, about this Star Saber, if it is indeed a legendary sword stuck in a stone, as the story goes there is only one person can pull it out. And that person would be the one who carries the Matrix already.”

“You don’t know that,” said Smokescreen. “I’m gonna go try and grab it.”
“No, you can’t,” insisted Pepper.

“Why not?”

It was Jack that answered. “Because Megatron’s here.”

There, off to one side, was the big silver mech giving orders to some miners.

“The Dark Lord himself.” Smokescreen smirked and smashed his fist into his palm. “He won’t know what hit him.”

“Smokescreen, we should really wait for backup,” Pepper insisted again.

“You heard Ratchet backup’s not available right now.” Smokescreen stood up from his hiding place. “You can wait if you want but I’m going in.”

“Wait-” But Smokescreen was already running toward the relic with his blasters out. Pepper sighed. “…He didn’t wait.”

“Yeah,” Jack agreed. “He still pretty impulsive-!!!”

A metal shield slammed down next to him while Pepper crouched on his other side. Jack ducked lower and covered his head with his arms as a few blaster shots slammed into the shield but Pepper held it firm. Then there was the unearthly screech of two insecticons. They fired twice more before passing overhead.

“Kid, call Ratchet,” Pepper ordered, standing, optics never leaving the Cons. “Tell him to get Optimus here now before Smokescreen gets himself killed. I’ll deal with these two.” He drew a sword from his back. Pepper moved away from the boy so he wouldn’t accidentally step on him while he fought. He took a ready stance with his shield up as one of the insecticons descended upon him.

Jack pulled out his phone and dialed the base. “Ratchet, you gotta get Optimus here now! Smokescreen went for the relic. It’s called the Star Sab-”

Pepper’s shout cut him off. “Look out, kid!”

Jack jerked his head up in time to see Pepper’s thrown sword pierce the insecticon that was about to grab him in the shoulder. Pepper changed his now empty servo into a blaster to deal with the other insecticon that still attacking him.

{Where in the name of Cybertron are you?} Ratchet’s voice filtered thru the phone as Jack ran to get away from the insecticon. {And did you say Star Sab?}

The insecticon screeched shrilly as it tore the sword from its shoulder and went after Jack. Ratchet must have heard it because he called Jack’s name before cutting the link to try to call Optimus again. Energon dripped from the gaping wound in the insecticon’s shoulder and its arm hung limp and useless as it chased after Jack. The boy dodged the grasping claw and then dove to the side to avoid being crushed by a ped. He rolled to his feet and ran for a narrow gap in the rocks nearby. He slipped into the gap just in time as he felt the wind from the claw that barely missed him. Once he was inside, the insecticon still tried to get him but it could only fit a single clawed digit into the gap. Jack dodged it twice before there was a loud crash outside his hiding spot and the insecticon was gone. He heard it screeching again, followed by blaster fire, silence and then: “Kid?”

Jack moved forward and peeked out of the gap in the rocks. Pepper was limping away from the
insecticon’s body, a nasty gash in his leg that was oozing energon. He also had a large dent in one shoulder guard that made it impossible to raise his arm. Using his shield for support, he crouched before the boy.

“Are you alright, kid? No injuries?”

Jack stepped out. “Yeah. I’m fine. Just a little shaken up.”

Blaster fire sounded in the distance. Pepper looked up and accessed the SDS. All of Team Prime with the exception of Ratchet had arrived. And Smokescreen was still online.

“Seems like Optimus has finally arrived. I hope Smokescreen is ok. He’s alive at least.”

Arcee, Bulkhead, and Bumblebee engaged the Cons to rescue Smokescreen while Optimus went after the Star Saber that was being carried off by the Nemesis, still stuck in the giant boulder. Megatron took to the air to stop the Prime, but the troops he left behind did not fare well against the Autobots.

Smokescreen was a little banged up when they got to him but he was able to still get to his peds. Arcee grabbed his arm and pulled him closer to her level.

“Where’s Jack?” she demanded.

“I, uh, left him over there with Pepper.” There was a body of an insecticon near where he pointed. Dread crept over him. “Oh no.”

“Jack!” Arcee transformed and took off. She rounded the rocks.

Pepper was there, down on one knee, blaster charged and his rectangular shield hiding most of his frame. He put away his blaster when she transformed. “Oh, it’s just you.”

“Where’s Jack?” she asked, worried.

“Arcee?” Jack stepped out from behind the shield and came up to her as she crouched to his level. “Arcee.”

“What could you possibly have been thinking?” she reprimanded.

“I-” He hung his head. “I’m sorry.”

“Is Optimus going after the Star Saber?” asked Pepper, trying to change the subject. He pushed himself to his peds using his shield for support. “Does he need help?”

“You wouldn’t be much help to him if he did,” Bulkhead answered, eyeing the field patch Pepper had applied to his own leg.

“You’d be surprised. Where is he now?”

“Still trying to catch the Nemesis,” beeped Bumblebee from beyond the rocks.

They all moved, Pepper still limping despite his statement, to better watch Optimus launch himself off the mountain toward the giant boulder being hauled away by the warship. One of Megatron’s bolts hit him, nearly knocking him off course but he transformed and managed to reach out and catch the hilt of the Star Saber. Megatron and his eradicons flew past him and up toward the
Nemesis. While Optimus hung there, the saber began to glow, energy swirling around the blade as it slid out of the rock. Megatron retreated into the Nemesis as Optimus fell. The Prime hit the ground with a resounding boom, dust flying from the slight crater he made. Optimus rose to his peds and pulled the saber out of the ground.

“I loosened it for him,” Smokescreen claimed.

Pepper rolled his optics behind his mask. “More like I was right. Just like Arthur and Excalibur, only Optimus could pull the sword out of the stone.”

The Nemesis released the giant boulder and it came crashing down the side of the mountain toward Optimus.

“OPTIMUS! RETREAT!” Arcee shouted at him in alarm.

“NOW!” Bulkhead bellowed beside her.

Optimus turned from examining the saber to look at the approaching threat. Just as it was about to crush him, he swung the Star Saber up, slicing the giant boulder cleanly, the two halves rolling to a stop well behind him. Pepper let out a low whistle.

“Did he just…?” started Bulkhead.

“Sure did,” chirped Bumblebee.

“No way,” breathed Jack.

Optimus looked up at the Nemesis. After a moment, he ran forward few steps before spinning and swinging his sword. The blade released a wave of energy that crashed into the Nemesis causing the ship shudder violently. Smoke poured from the damaged engines as it continued to retreat.

“It can do that?” Smokescreen asked in awe.

“Apparently,” Pepper answered bluntly. While the power of the Star Saber was impressive, he was already used to overpowered weapons, having seen Liliy’s laserblade in action.

Optimus watched to Nemesis until it disappeared. The Star Saber stopped glowing once the threat was out of site. Finally he turned toward the group. They came forward to meet him. He caught sight of Pepper limping along behind them and frowned. What was Liliy going to say about that?

Pepper caught his look. {She doesn’t need to know until after I’m fixed.} He privately commed him. {Besides a few injuries are worth it if it keeps the kid safe.} He glanced down at Jack.

Optimus nodded gratefully.

“Shall we return then?” Pepper asked out loud.

“Ratchet, we need a bridge,” Optimus said into his comm.

A ground bridge appeared and they returned to the base.

“How epic was that,” exclaimed Smokescreen as they went. “Aha, I saw it with my own optics.” He spun, copying Optimus’ finishing move. “But I still don’t believe it.”

Arcee rounded on him. “You know what I don’t believe! That after everything you’ve been told, you still put a human at risk.”
Jack tried to interrupt. “Arcee-”

But she just ignored him, turning on Pepper instead. “And you! I expected better of you too. You’ve been on Earth longer.”

“Arc-” Jack tried again.

This time it was Pepper who cut him off. He pushed his mask up to glare down at the smaller femme. “Ok. First of all, don’t blame this on me. I didn’t even know he was there until after the bridge was closed. I also advised Smokescreen to wait for backup,” he gestured at the white and blue mech, “but he didn’t listen. He gave away our position--probably without realizing it--when he broke cover and left me to defend the human by myself because he was too focused ‘making Optimus proud’.” The last part was accompanied by air quotes.

“Ouch,” said Bulkhead.

Smokescreen looked hurt and ashamed.

“Are you gonna blame your injuries on him too?” accused Ratchet.

Pepper looked up. “No. Those are my fault. I was trying to take the insecticons down without relying on Red En.” That was just an excuse though. He actually didn’t have any red energon with him.

“Plus you had to throw your sword to save me,” added Jack, finally able to a get a word in. “And besides, none of this was Smokescreen’s fault. Or Pepper’s. I shouldn’t have even gone.”

Arcee sighed. “It’s late. I’ll talk to you about this tomorrow.” She looked over at Ratchet. “Send Jack home.”

“But-” Jack started object but Arcee gave him a stern glare. “Hhhhh. Fine.” And he left through the ground bridge.

Arcee turned back to Smokescreen once Jack was gone. “We’ve been in need of another Autobot in our ranks. Not another child.”

“Look, Arcee. I was wrong,” said Smokescreen. “And I’m sorry. Again. And if you need to kick me off Team Prime-”

Optimus spoke up, his tone stern. “Disregard for human safety, or anyone’s safety, including your own,” he glanced over at Pepper, who was now perched on the edge of the bottom concrete tier next to the stairs, “will not be tolerated. Do you understand?”

“Fully, sir,” answered Smokescreen.

“Technically, I’m not part of Team Prime,” Pepper said, holding up a digit to punctuate his point. He waved toward the ground bridge. “And if you don’t want me around, I can go.”

“I would like you to stay, Pepper,” replied Optimus. “If only to help me finish decoding the Iacon database.”

“As you wish.”

Optimus looked around at the faces of his little team. “We Autobots must never lose sight of the fact that upon this Earth we are titans. And such power must be used wisely.”
The Star Saber suddenly started glowing again in his servo. Optimus lifted it in front of his face.

“Whoa,” Bulkhead voiced everyone’s surprise.

“Optimus, speak to me,” Ratchet demanded as the Prime’s optics seemed to grow distant while he stared at the glowing blade. “Optimus.”

“I am receiving a message,” Optimus finally replied.

“From who?” asked Ratchet.

“Alpha Trion.”

That surprised everyone even more.

“Optimus, what is Alpha Trion saying?” inquired Ratchet.

Optimus did not reply. He just continued to stare at the blade, optics moving as they watched something no one else could see. The saber finally stopped glowing and Optimus collapsed down on one knee with a groan.

Ratchet was at his side in an instant. “Easy, Optimus.” He helped him back to his peds.

“So, did Alpha Trion ask about me?” Smokescreen asked.

Annoyed, Bulkhead pushed him aside. “What was the message?”

“It is paramount that we recover the final four Iacon relics,” Optimus answered. “The Omega Keys.”

“Keys?” repeated Arcee.

“To what?” Ratchet wanted to know.

“To the regeneration of our home planet,” answered Optimus.

That shocked all the Autobots.

The least surprised was Pepper. “The keys to restoring Cybertron, huh? Sounds like we’re in for a real treasure hunt.”

Optimus turned to him. “Pepper, I would like to us to start decoding right away.”

“Unfortunately, you’ll have to start without me. Either I get this leg taken care of now,” he gestured to his injured thigh, “or I’ll have to go home and the Madam might not let me come back.”

“Ratchet, would you please fix Pepper.” It was more of an order than a request.

Ratchet nodded, still too stunned to speak. He went over Pepper and helped him to the medbay.

“Why didn’t you say something about this earlier?” Ratchet asked after he actually found out how bad the injury was.

“Well, I’m afraid most of the CRC has inherited the Madam’s habit of ignoring their injuries until they become severely debilitating. And with everything that was going on after we got back, you
seemed more concerned about Optimus.”

“When it’s something like this, you better speak up next time,” Ratchet chided.

“In that case, after you’re done with me, you might want to check on Smokescreen. It looks like someone shot him in the back.”

Ratchet did grab Smokescreen and pull him over to the medbay after he was done with Pepper’s repairs. The medic insisted that Pepper stay off his leg for a while to let his self-repair systems take care of the rest. Bulkhead moved a large crate to the back of the monitors for Pepper to sit on so he could continue to help Optimus with the decoding.

“Whoa,” Pepper exclaimed, looking over Optimus’ work. “You’ve gotten this far already?”

“I am not sure,” the Prime answered, “but after the message from Alpha Trion, the decoding has become a little easier.”

“Lucky.”

There was air of excitement among the rest of the Autobots after the idea of restoring Cybertron finally sunk in.

“Pack your gear,” Bulkhead declared. “We’re going back to Cybertron.”

“I really can’t believe it,” beeped Bumblebee.

Ratchet actually laughed. He had just finished up with some minor repairs on Smokescreen. He turned to the scout. “Well, believe it now, Bumblebee. Civilization at last.”

“But I just got here,” pouted Smokescreen.

“Remember oil baths,” Arcee said. “First thing I’m gonna do planet side is soak for an entire solar cycle.”

Bulkhead laughed this time. “I can’t wait to tell Miko.”

That seemed to kill the mood.

“...And Jack,” added Arcee, quietly.

“And Raf.” The tone of his beeps sad.

Smokescreen got up from the med berth and went over to Optimus.

“Uh, Optimus, keys open doors. Can they really revive an entire planet?”

Optimus paused his work and turned to him. “While I am unfamiliar with the lore of these Omega Keys, Alpha Trion knew many secrets. And the Ancients possessed technology that has long been lost to what we consider modern science.” The other Autobots gathered around to listen. “Whatever their function, this much is certain, we cannot restore Cybertron without all four Omega keys in our possession.”
“Which means can’t afford to lose a single one to Megatron,” Arcee put in.

“Four sets of coordinates from Alpha Trion remain encrypted.” Optimus turned back to the console. “It is logical to conclude that each corresponds to the location of one of the Omega keys.” He looked thru the monitor at Pepper. “We must not waver until we decode them all. The future of our home world depends on it.”

“Optimus, Pepper, sorry to bother you but…”

“What is it, Ratchet?” Optimus turned to him.

“I need Pepper actually,” Ratchet said. Pepper stood up moved to the side of the monitors to get a better view of him. “Liliy said we could still ask her for supplies, right?”

Pepper nodded. “As far as I’m aware, yes.”

“Well, I’m trying to make a holder for Optimus to better carry the Star Saber and I’m missing a few pieces.” Ratchet handed a data pad up to him. “I also added a few medical supplies that I’m almost out of.”

“Sure, Ratchet,” Pepper said. “If you don’t mind, Optimus?”

“That is fine, Pepper,” replied Optimus. “I can manage for a little while without you. Just remember to come back.”

Pepper smiled. “Don’t worry. I’ll do my best to convince the Madam.”

He snapped down his mask and requested a ground bridge back to the CRC base. It opened behind him and he turned and went thru it.

“Pepper, you’re back,” Leecher said as Pepper entered the main hall and pushed his mask up.

“Just for a bit. Ratchet needed me to get a few things,” Pepper replied, handing them the data pad that Ratchet had given him.

Leecher took the data pad but didn’t look at it right away. “What happened to your leg?”

Of course they would notice that. “It was just a scratch. Ratchet took care of it.”

Leecher looked at the data pad. They turned. There was a single mech crossing the hall. “Foxtrot, catch.” And tossed the pad at him.

Despite his surprise, the medic expertly caught the data pad and looked at it. “What’s this?”

“Please go get those items out of storage for Pepper,” Leecher ordered.

“On it!” And Foxtrot ran off.

Once he was gone, Leecher whirled on Pepper and grabbed him by his collar armor to pull him down to their level. The mask popped open to reveal that Liliy was also with Leech. She was frowning.

“Just a scratch?” she hissed. “Pepper, you went out on a mission with them, didn’t you?”
“Well, I couldn’t let the new kid go alone,” Pepper answered sheepishly. “And Optimus and the rest of the team were unreachable at the time.”

“And how were you injured?”

“Two insecticons. I had to protect the human--Jack, I believe--on my own.”

“Two insecticons should’ve been easy for you, even while protecting a human. Unless…” Her gaze traveled down his chassis.

“Yeah. I was in such a rush to speak to Optimus, I forgot to grab a canister of Red En for my mod,” he admitted.

Liliy sighed and Leecher released his collar. “Pepper…”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re ok,” Liliy said as Leecher pulled a canister of Red En from their subspace and put it in Pepper’s servo. “But don’t forget to take this with you this time.”

“Yes ma’am.” He opened a panel on his right side, opposite his t-cog, and inserted the canister into the mod.

“So, how is the decoding going?”

“The latest coordinates led to a legendary sword called the Star Saber. Only Optimus can wield it but it is pretty powerful.” He projected images of Optimus cleaving the giant boulder in two and then damaging the Nemesis for them to see.

Leech whistled. “That could turn the tide of the war.”

“Megatron probably knows this and that’s why he left,” said Liliy.

“Left? Megatron left Earth?” asked Pepper.

“Yeah. We tracked the Nemesis to the dark side of the moon where they hid their space bridge and then Megatron and Dreadwing disappeared the portal to parts unknown. No doubt he went to look for a way to counter Optimus and his new found power.”

“Greaaat… Anyway, the Star Saber also apparently contained a message from Alpha Trion, the old archivist from Iacon.”

“Yes, I know of him.”

“According to him, Optimus said, the last four relics are called Omega Keys and they are the keys to reviving Cybertron.”

“Reviving Cybertron? But how do you revive a planet with keys?”

“I’m not sure but I get the feeling that Optimus isn’t telling us everything.”

“That’s probably wise, just in case someone gets captured by the Decepticons.”

“So, is it alright for me to go back and finish helping Optimus?”

“Yes. That’s fine. But No. More. Missions.” Leecher’s digit poked Pepper in the chest with each
word out of Lilii’s mouth. “Am I *clearly* understood?”

Pepper snapped to attention and saluted. “Yes Ma’am!”

“Good. Now where is Fox with those supplies?”

“I’m back,” Pepper called as he stepped out of a ground bridge near the medbay.

“Oh, good. Did you get everything?” Ratchet eyed the small cart Pepper brought with him.

“Yeah. The Madam just gave me some energon too since I’ll be staying here until we done with the decoding and I didn’t know how your stores were.”

“Liliy is letting you stay?” asked Optimus, turning from the console.

Pepper looked up at him. “Yeah. She was a little upset that I went on a mission and got hurt but after I explained everything to her and told her about the Omega Keys, she said I could come back. Of course, I had to promise not to go on any more missions.”

Optimus smiled. “I am glad. I appreciate your help.”

“She also said to be aware that Megatron may be planning something to counter the Star Saber. Apparently, he left Earth via the Decepticon space bridge a while ago but he returned while I was at home.”

“We will keep that in mind.” Optimus went back to decoding.

“Can I leave this to you, Ratchet?” Pepper asked.

“Yes. I’ll take care of it. You go help Optimus.”

“Autobots, we have decoded the first set of the final four coordinates.” Optimus faced the others as he gave his orders. “Divide into teams in the event that we are able to decode another before the first team returns.”

“I’m on team one,” exclaimed Smokescreen. “Who’s with me?”

“I’ll go,” Arcee replied.

“After you, sir--ma’am,” Smokescreen corrected. He just wasn’t sure how to address her. “Commander?”

“This should be interesting,” Ratchet said as he opened the ground bridge for them.

*{Be careful this time, Smokescreen.}* Pepper commed him as he disappeared. *{And maybe use that relic you’re carrying.}* 

*{Oh, yeah. I forgot I had that. Thanks.}* 

Pepper rolled his optics and went back to work.
{Ratchet, ground bridge! Now!} Arcee commed the base desperately a while later.

But by the time Ratchet got the ground bridge open, only Arcee came staggering back.

“Arcee, what happened? Where’s Smokescreen?” asked Ratchet, guiding her over to the medbay to sit down.

“Did you get the relic?” inquired Bulkhead.

“No,” Arcee replied. “Megatron showed up. He was wielding a sword with the same power as the Star Saber. After I called for a bridge, he hit us with an energy wave that threw us into the air like ragdolls. Smokescreen recovered first and engaged Megatron with his blaster. I got up and fired at him too but he swung his sword again, releasing another wave. It hit Smokescreen and carried him into the side of the pyramid. And then he was just… gone. Like he’d turned to dust.”

“Poor kid,” said Bulkhead.

“Arcee, do not blame yourself,” Ratchet told her. “It could just’ve as easily been you-” He looked at the sound of a blaster charging.

It was Bulkhead. He was angry and battle-ready. “Well, I say we go claim a piece of Megatron’s miserable metal hide.”

“Yes, let’s go,” Bumblebee agreed.

“No,” Optimus’ voice stopped them. “We have already lost another one of our own today.”

“No you haven’t,” Pepper spoke up suddenly.

“What?” asked Ratchet.

“Smokescreen.” Pepper, now on the main floor, turned to the console and typed in a few commands. A map appeared on the monitor. There were two indicators on it, one Autobot, one Decepticon. He highlighted the Autobot signal. “According to the SDS, he’s still alive. Going by the exact coordinates of his spark, I’d guess he’s inside the pyramid he hit.”

“But… how?” asked Arcee.

Pepper turned to look at her. “The phase-shifter. He still had it on him and I advised him to use it as you guys were leaving. The impact very likely activated the shifter and that would explain why it seemed like he was ‘just gone’.”

“The SDS cannot tell his condition?” asked Optimus.

“No. Just that a spark is still active. But given what Arcee witnessed, it would appear that Megatron is now in possession of something equal to the Star Saber. Even with the phase-shifter, an impact from that most likely knocked him unconscious since he’s not moving.”

“If Megatron really has obtained might to equal the Star Saber, then only I have a chance of recovering the Omega Key and bringing back Smokescreen,” said Optimus.

“The fate of Cybertron rests upon the key’s retrieval,” agreed Ratchet.

“Whether Megatron knows it or not,” added Bulkhead.

“I guess it’s a good thing I finished making that holder,” said Ratchet. “Optimus, let me attach it
“Stay safe, Optimus.”

After Optimus left, Ratchet turned to Pepper.

“Can you bring up that SDS thing again?”

“Sure.” Pepper pulled it up on one monitor while he used the other two for decoding. “Keeping an optic on Optimus?”

“Yes.”

Optimus’ and Megatron’s signals danced around for a bit while they fought.

“Oh. Smokescreen’s finally moving,” Bulkhead exclaimed.

Smokescreen closed in on the fight and his signal almost merged with Optimus’. But they pulled apart again and stood next to each other.

{Ratchet, ground bridge!} Optimus commed.

Ratchet quickly activated the ground bridge controls. Optimus came thru first carrying the Star Saber in his servo but most of the blade was missing. He also had an ugly gash on his shoulder guard. Ratchet guided him over to the medbay as the ground bridge shut down.

Smokescreen came in behind Optimus. He was carrying the Omega Key and the phase-shifter was visible on his other wrist.

“Smokescreen! Glad to see you’re alive,” exclaimed Bulkhead.

“Yeah. Acree thought you were dead but Pepper said you were alive,” added Bumblebee.

“So the phase-shifter helped after all?” asked Pepper.

Smokescreen smiled. “Yeah. Thanks for the reminder, pal. That wave hit me like a wrecking ball. The impact must’ve activated the shifter. I don’t know how long I was unconscious—”

“Only about half an hour,” Pepper told him. “Anyway that’s how long it was from Arcee’s arrival to when your spark signal started moving again.”

“That’s not bad I guess.” Smokescreen shrugged. “But when I made my way back outside, Optimus and Megatron were deep in an epic throwdown. I waited for the right moment to make my move.”

“You’re learning,” said Arcee.

Ratchet had checked over Optimus and said he was fine to keep working. The Prime moved over to the console after setting aside the remains of the Star Saber. Pepper gave him a look, silently asking if Optimus was sure he was alright. Optimus just nodded at him. Pepper nodded back once
before going back to his place on the other side of the monitors.

“By the way, can I keep this?” Smokescreen asked Ratchet, showing him the phase-shifter. “I mean it is really working out for me.”

“Yeah. I guess,” sighed Ratchet. “Though, I didn’t even know you had it.”

“Oh. Yeah. I got from Pepper’s friends, the flyers. It’s what I used to get the Apex Armor from Starscream.”

“Well if they gave it to you, then you can definitely keep it.”

“Yes!” cheered Smokescreen. “Signature weapon!”

Then he turned and saw the broken Star Saber. His cheerful mood dropped as he approached it. The others gathered around behind him.

“You got yours,” said Bulkhead. “Optimus lost his.”

“The balance of power shifted again,” stated Arcee.

“While he may have wielded the power of the Ancients for only one day, Optimus does not require it to be the mightiest of warriors.”

Pepper happened to glance at Optimus’ face thru the monitor after Ratchet spoke and caught the briefest glimpse of something odd in the Prime’s optics but then he blinked and it was gone.

Chapter End Notes

You know what's funny. I have rewatched these episodes a lot but it wasn't until I was thinking how to write them that I made the connection between the Star Saber and the Sword in the Stone/King Arthur. That led Pepper having a sword and shield like a knight. He is a snow plow so I imagined that his plow blade becomes his shield. It hangs on his back over his sword. And when he is sitting, you can't see his helm over the shield when you're behind him.
Knock Out and Breakdown ducked out of sight when they saw the Autobots’ ground bridge appear. They left the relic container open and visible on top of a large boulder, the key still in it.

“Are we gonna go get ’em, doc?” asked Breakdown, glancing at his partner.

“You stay here. I want to try out this.” Knock Out held up the resonance blaster that he borrowed from Soundwave. He attached it to his forearm plating. “You can lend me a hand if it looks like trouble.”

Breakdown shot him skeptical look. “Are you sure, Knock Out?”

“Absolutely. I have more confidence knowing you are here.” And winked.

This was Knock Out’s usual way of flirting but Breakdown still blushed slightly.

Knock Out sauntered out of hiding without waiting for a reply. “Well, well, look who it is.”

“I’ll handle the mad doctor,” Arcee told Bumblebee as she brought out her blasters. “You grab the key.”

Bumblebee activated his blasters as well. “You got it.”

“I’m glad you’re here,” Knock Out continued nonchalantly. “I didn’t think I was going to get to play with this.” He fired the resonance blaster at Arcee, knocking her back.

Bumblebee stopped in surprise. Then he was suddenly slammed against the rocks by a sonic blast. The constant assault kept him pinned. Knock Out moved closer, intensifying the attack. Bumblebee’s chest plates started to crack and buckle under the pressure.

“Who knew that sound waves could be such a,” he turned suddenly as Arcee came running up behind him and blasted her, “knockout!”

Arcee cried out when she was slammed against the rocks.

“What’s that, dear?” Knock Out called cheerily over the sound of the blaster. “I can’t hear you.”

“Bee, the relic,” Arcee cried.

Knock Out stopped when he realized Bumblebee was still able to move. “Scrap!”

{Need my help yet, doc?} Breakdown commed as the two Autobots limped toward the relic and his hiding place.

“First, let me see how low this can go.” Knock Out pointed the resonance blaster at the ground directly under his peds and fired. The resulting sound waves radiated out, slamming into the Autobots and raising a lot of dust.

Breakdown stepped out as the dust cleared. Both Arcee and Bumblebee, having been sent flying, were unconscious and the scout was mostly buried under a pile of rocks.

“Why don’t we kill them?” Breakdown suggested while Knock Out retrieved the relic. “It would be two less Autobots to worry about.”
“Because, Breakdown, we’re being watched. And I don’t think they would let us.” Knock Out nodded up toward the cliff above them.

Romeo stood there, both blasters out but down at his sides. The others were more hidden but Breakdown still spotted the two SUVs. And they all had an unfriendly air about them.

“Don’t worry. We’re leaving,” Knock Out called loudly before requesting a ground bridge.

After they were gone, Romeo and Hirry immediately went down to make sure that Bumblebee and Arcee weren’t badly hurt while Zulu kept watch.

“They’re ok. Just a little banged up,” said Romeo. “Let’s go before they come back online.”

“Hm, it appears identical to the one taken from me by Optimus Prime,” Megatron mused after examining the relic that Knock Out and Breakdown brought him. “Ahhh. Perhaps it is decoy the Autobots allowed you to seize as a means of sabotage.”

“Unlikely, my liege. They battled too desperately for it,” insisted Knock Out.

“Then pieces of a larger puzzle perhaps.”

The computer that Soundwave was working at beeped. Megatron glanced over his shoulder at the monitor.

“Excellent, Soundwave. With any luck, these new coordinates will shed some light on the subject.”

“Soundwave’s on fire,” commented Knock Out. “And so am I!” He turned to leave.

“Keep your vanity in check, doctor.” Megatron’s voice stopped him short.

Knock Out whirled back around. “Haven’t I proven myself?”

“Your scientific expertise remains of greater use to me analyzing our latest acquisition. I must know what this relic is and what it can do.” Megatron handed the key back to Knock Out and turned away. “Breakdown can go with Dreadwing to locate the next relic.”

Knock Out started. “Actually, lord Megatron, I need Breakdown’s help analyzing this. I’m sure Dreadwing will manage just fine by himself.”

Megatron looked over his shoulder at him. “Hm. Very well.”

“Thank you, my lord. Come along, Breakdown.”

After they left the bridge, Breakdown glanced at Knock Out.

“You don’t really need my help. What’s the matter, doc?”

“The last time you went on a mission with Dreadwing, you almost didn’t come back.”

“Yeah but that was Airachnid’s fault. Not Dreadwing’s.”

“I don’t care. I’m not letting you out of my sight like that again.”
When Arcee and Bumblebee returned to base, Ratchet pulled them over to the medbay. Arcee sat on a med berth while Ratchet scanned Bumblebee and initiated repairs.

“I’m sorry, Optimus,” Arcee apologized when the Prime came over. “Knock Out was there, waiting for us. Seems the Cons are improving their decoding skills.”

“And it seems with two keys already separated,” added Ratchet, “no one currently possesses the means to revive Cybertron.”

“While our quest to restore our planet may have reached a stalemate, securing the remaining keys is still the most prudent course of action,” replied Optimus.

“Man, it must’ve been crazy with Knock Out going all sonic,” said Smokescreen. “Oh, I wish I’d been there. I would’ve-”

“Would’ve what?” snapped Arcee. “Recovered the key, like you did the first one?”

“Maybe. Who knows?” Smokescreen shrugged. “I just want us to be firing on all cylinders. You know, now that the Star Saber’s gone.”

“You say that, Smokescreen,” interrupted Pepper, “but from my perspective, you are the one who is off sync and out of alignment.”

Smokescreen turned to look at him. “Huh? Me? What makes you say that?”

“You’re the newbie, the rookie. You lack experience. You might have a good helm on your shoulders but you have a bad habit of getting ahead of yourself too. One of these times you’re going to get in too deep and you’re not going to be able to handle the repercussions. You need to slow down. To listen. To be a team player. You may have a lot to offer but you also need to let them,” Pepper gestured to the other Autobots, “help you. They have been doing this for a long time and they know what they’re doing. Maybe things would have gone differently if you were there, maybe not. But your yammering is getting on Arcee’s nerves and if I were her, I would have decked you by now.”

“Pepper!” Optimus admonished.

“And that’s why I’m not an Autobot. Oh, and from what I heard, Knock Out wasn’t the only Con there.”

“Huh? Breakdown was also…?” asked Arcee, shocked. “But we never saw him.”

“Who did you hear that from anyway?” Ratchet wanted to know.

“Romeo. He was there with Hirry and Zulu. It was because of them that Knock Out declined Breakdown’s suggestion to kill the two of you.”

“If they were there, why didn’t they take the key?” questioned Ratchet.

“I don’t know. I wasn’t informed of their orders.”

“If Liliy isn’t going to let you guys help, why bother sending you?”

“To keep you all alive, obviously. Or in your case, Ratchet, make sure you don’t be an idiot.”

“Wha-?!?” sputtered Ratchet.
Pepper laughed nervously. “Sorry. The Synth’N incident just came to mind.”

Bulkhead and Smokescreen unfortunately came back empty-handed after being sent to retrieve the third key.

“Smokescreen was sucker-punched.” Bulkhead explained, laying a servo on Smokescreen’s shoulder. “Could’ve happened to any of us.”

“But it didn’t,” Smokescreen retorted,shrugging off Bulkhead’s servo. “Because I was the one who dropped his guard. I was the one who blew it.”

“Blew it?” Pepper came down to the main floor. “Smokescreen, guard up.”

Smokescreen whirled on him. “What?”

“I’m going to attack you.” Pepper’s mask snapped down and the visor turned red. “Put your guard up.”

Smokescreen did but he never saw Pepper come at him. He just found himself flat on his back, staring at the ceiling. And Pepper was standing where he had been before.

“What happened, Smoke?” Pepper asked. “I thought you put your guard up.”

Smokescreen sat up. “I did. What…” He rubbed the back of his helm in confusion. “What happened?”

“I laid you out on the floor,” Pepper responded. “Gently, of course. Just to prove that you probably didn’t let your guard down, your attacker was just moving too fast for you to notice.”

“That’s all fine but who besides the CRC uses red energon?” questioned Ratchet, almost accusingly.

Pepper glanced over at him. “Starscream.”

“Oh, yeah. He did get away with a chunk of it, didn’t he,” Bulkhead remembered.

“That still doesn’t change the fact that I was the one who lost the relic,” grumbled Smokescreen. “Some great warrior I’m turning out to be.”

“You still don’t get it, do you?” Arcee suddenly snapped. She was fed up Smokescreen’s little pity party. “A few victories aren’t going to make you a legend. And not every mission results in success. Not for me, not for Bee, not even for Optimus. We’ve gained victories and we’ve lost some. We’ve also lost friends. We’ve even lost a world. But this is one time we get a do over. We have a chance to bring back Cybertron and everyone in this room needs to be in sync. This isn’t about you or your destiny.”

“Arcee, you have made your point,” Optimus said.

“Yeah. At least I was gentle,” added Pepper. He turned to Smokescreen again. “I think what Arcee is trying to say is similar to what I said earlier about being a team player.”

“There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for this team,” Smokescreen declared.

“Then stop trying to be a hero and start being an Autobot,” Arcee shot back.
“You know what... Maybe I’m just not good enough.” And just like that, Smokescreen transformed and sped out of the base.

“Next time Optimus advises you to stop, perhaps you should listen,” huffed Ratchet.

“I’ll bring him back,” offered Bulkhead.

Optimus put out his servo to stop him. “Smokescreen is young, Bulkhead, and has much to learn. But right now he needs to clear his thoughts.” He turned to Pepper. “And we need to finish decoding the final Iacon entry.”

“Are you sure it’s ok to leave Smokescreen like that?” Pepper asked quietly.

“Perhaps if he could talk to someone else,” replied Optimus. “A neutral party?”

“I’ll ask the Madam.”

Smokescreen was so absorbed in his thoughts that he didn’t notice the other vehicle pull up alongside him until they spoke.

“Hey there.”

Smokescreen slammed on his brakes and came to a screeching halt in the middle of the road. The other vehicle did a u-turn and came up to him.

“You’re Smokescreen, right?” they inquired in a femme’s voice.

“That’s me. What do you want?” Smokescreen drew back warily. He couldn’t see an insignia anywhere on her yellow frame.

“Heard you were in an argument. You wanna talk about it?”

“Not really.”

“Alright then. How ‘bout a race? To take your mind off it.”

Smokescreen looked over her large, bulky frame again. “Are you sure you can keep up?”

“I may not be able to accelerate as quickly as you,” she circled around so she was lined up next to Smokescreen, “but once I’m up to speed, you better watch out.”

“In that case…”

“Ah. The final entry has been decoded,” Optimus said as he turned to the others.

“Has it?” Pepper asked when a map did not show up.

As Optimus turned back to the monitor, the coordinates turned into a highly pixelated image. “Hm. Perhaps it’s a layer of secondary encryption.”

“Maybe it’s picture of the relic,” suggested Bulkhead as the image slowly became clearer.

“Of what possible use could that be to us without knowing its location,” Ratchet shot back.
“I trust that Alpha Trion had his reasons,” Optimus put in.

When the image finally became clear, they were all very surprised to see that it was a picture of someone they knew.

“Smokescreen?” asked Bulkhead.

“Is this that hot shot’s idea of a joke?” snapped Arcee.

Bumblebee beeped in disbelief.

“Maybe he knows where the key is,” suggested Bulkhead.

Arcee raised an optic ridge at him. “And never bothered to mention it?”

“A more likely possibility is that Smokescreen himself somehow is the key without knowing it,” Ratchet ventured.

“Or simply its container,” guessed Pepper.

“Whatever the case, he could be in grave danger.” Optimus opened his comm. “Smokescreen, return to base immediately.”

No answer.

Ratchet frowned. “He may have deactivated his commlink.”

Optimus turned to Pepper.

Pepper touched his comm. “Hirry, are you with Smokescreen?”

His only answer was a burst of static.

“Hirry?” Pepper repeated with some concern.

More static and then {...R-radio Tower.}

“Frag!” Pepper swore as he hurried to the ground bridge controls.

“What’s wrong, Pepper?” asked Optimus.

Pepper had the coordinates locked in and was activating the ground bridge. “Soundwave is already there!”

They ran through the ground bridge, Pepper in the lead, but, by the time they came out, Soundwave already had Smokescreen and was disappearing through his own ground bridge. Pepper went to Hirry, who was lying unconscious not far away.

“She’s hurt,” he said after checking her over. "I’m going to take her home.” And disappeared with her through a second ground bridge without waiting for a reply.

Smokescreen escaped from Knock Out and managed to make it up to the flight deck after stealing the two keys that were on the Nemesis. Megatron and a squad of eradicons arrived on the flight deck as well.
“The keys!” Megatron demanded as the eradicons aimed their blasters at him.

Smokescreen backed away, glancing behind him at the edge of the flight deck and the ground very far below it.

“A pity you aren’t capable of flight,” Megatron sneered.

“Yeah. Like I’m gonna let that stop me.” Smokescreen turned and then jerked to a stop when the gulf twins suddenly landed on their peds in front of him.

“Autobot, don’t tell me you were just thinking of doing something stupid just now,” chided Golf.

“I didn’t have any better options until you showed up,” countered Smokescreen. He looked up at the both of them. “You are here to help me, right?”

“Of course. Pepper begged the Madam and here we are,” answered Indy.

“We’re very sorry, Megatron,” Golf addressed the warlord.

“But we’ll be taking the relics this time,” finished Indy.

They turned, grabbing Smokescreen by the arms, and took a running leap off the back of the Nemesis just as the Autobot had intended to do before. Only now there was a ground bridge portal waiting for them as they cleared the ship’s engines. The twins dropped Smokescreen into it, transforming a split second later to blast off into the clouds.

Smokescreen came out just feet above a forest. He dropped into the trees, the branches snapping under his weight but effectively slowing his fall. He still hit the ground with a heavy thud. Groaning, he rolled over and climbed to his peds.

“Smokescreen!” Pepper was coming toward him. “Sorry about the rough landing, but it was better than you splattering yourself.”

“I would’ve figured something out,” Smokesceen argued. “But thanks for the assist anyway.”

“You’re welcome. Come on.” Pepper turned and waved for him to follow. “Let’s get you back to base.”

When they reached the nearest clearing, Optimus and Bulkhead were waiting for them.

“Well, this ends my part,” Pepper remarked. “It was fun working with you guys.”

“You’re not coming back with us?” asked Smokescreen.

“There is nothing left for me to help translate. And the Madam said I had to come back.”

“But Megatron only had one other key besides mine. Plus ours, that only makes three.”

“I told you. Starscream has it. But be wary of him.”

“Of course. Thank you, Pepper,” Optimus said. “Your help was much appreciated. We will take care of things from here.”

Pepper nodded. “Be careful. And, Smokescreen.”

The mech looked up at him. “Hm?”
“You did well.” And smiled.

He returned the smile. “Thanks.”

After receiving a message from Dreadwing, Optimus and the others went to meet him. They came out of their ground bridge with blasters ready.

“I am not here to fight,” insisted the flyer when spotted him. “But to give you this.” He gestured to the large, golden hammer that was laying on the ground in front of him.

“The forge of Solus Prime,” said Arcee.

“Could be rigged to blow,” Bulkhead warned.

Optimus retracted his battle mask. “Dreadwing, what do you ask in return?”

“Only that you use it wisely,” he replied.

“And? The Omega Keys?” questioned Arcee.

“In Megatron’s possession. Under heaviest guard.”

“Scream did make a deal with the Cons,” growled Bulkhead.

Optimus put away his blasters and asked the one question that was bothering him. “Why?”

“A shadow of disgrace has been cast upon the Decepticons.” Dreadwing looked down. “It is a cause I no longer wish to be part of.”

Optimus stepped forward. “Then I appeal to you again, join us and help end this conflict once and for all.”

Dreadwing looked up at him. “Betraying my kind is not the same as accepting yours.” He started to turn and then paused before facing them again. “There is one more thing I would like to ask for.”

“What is it?” asked Optimus.

“That human from before, the one that mentioned my brother. I would like to speak to her again.”

Optimus blinked, surprised, but answered, “She is no longer in our care but I will ask her if she is willing to come here. If that is what you want?”

“Yes.”

Optimus accessed his commlink and dialed Liliy.

{What can I do for you, Optimus?}

“Dreadwing would like to speak with you. We are with him now.”

{Very well. I shall be right there.} And she hung up.

To Dreadwing, “She is coming.”

A few moments later, a ground bridge opened and Liliy appeared by herself and in her human
form. She locked eyes with Optimus and nodded before turning to Dreadwing.

“What did you want to talk to me about?” she asked.

Dreadwing went down on one knee to be closer to her level, but he still kept a wary optic on the Autobots as they were still aiming their blasters at him.

“You knew,” he stated simply.

Liliy raised an eyebrow at him. “You talked to Starscream?”

Dreadwing looked away. “I… overheard him tell lord Megatron.”

“I see.” She crossed her arm in front of her. “But there is another part that even he doesn’t know. Your twin no longer wanders the ShadowZone.”

Dreadwing stared at her. “Is this true?!”

“Yes. I took him down myself and had his corpse retrieved shortly after. We put him to rest under our base if you would like to see him.”

“Can I?”

“Yes.”

Her ground bridge opened again. She nodded at Optimus again before gesturing for Dreadwing to follow her. Glancing briefly at the Autobots, he got up and went after her.

“M-madam?” Victor asked hesitantly upon seeing Dreadwing.

Liliy waved him off. “It’s ok, Victor. He just here to see his brother.”

The mech bowed slightly. “Yes, ma’am.”

Out in the main hall, “What is he doing here?”

It was Wheeljack. He and X-ray were heading for the rec room. The wrecker was glaring at the Con. Dreadwing shifted behind Liliy.

“He is my guest, just as you are, Wheeljack. I suggest you mind your manners,” Liliy replied, her tone commanding. She turned and headed for a hallway that branched off to the left. “This way, Dreadwing.”

“You are the leader here?” he asked once they were alone again.

She glanced up at him. “Does that surprise you?”

They turned down another hallway that descended to the second level of the base. Unlike the main level, the hallway was barely lit. The lights only coming on as they walked.

“Yes, it does,” he admitted. “Are you really a human?”

She stopped under a light that had just come on and turned to him. “No. I’m a Laserblade.” And transformed.
He stared. “I see,” he said finally, quietly. “So one survived.”

“Hmh. Indeed.” She turned again and continued a bit farther down the hall. Stopping next to a door, “Here we are.”

The door opened and they entered. The room was small, barely long enough to accommodate the offline but sealed stasis pod that lay on supports to keep it from rolling around. But it was still wide enough to house at least one more pod.

Liliy remained by the door while Dreadwing went over to pod.

“Unfortunately, I had to cut off his helm to stop his undead wandering,” she explained, “but I made sure they collected all his parts and put him back together before we put him to rest permanently. I hope you are satisfied with that.”

“That’s fine.” He laid his servo on the glass. “But Starscream will pay.”

“I won’t stop you from getting revenge. I still haven’t forgiven him for what he did to us either. But I will ask you. If you should fail, would you like to be buried here, next to your twin?”

He looked down at her. “You would do that?”

“Yes. If you want it.”

His gaze returned to his brother. “I would be fine with it. If I fail.”

“I understand. Dreadwing, you remember ZZ-05, don’t you?” Liliy gestured to the eradicon that appeared in the doorway.

At Dreadwing’s vaguely confused expression, Ucon spoke, “I was the eradicon who greeted you when you and commander Breakdown returned after your last mission with Airachnid.”

“Hm. Yes, I remember.” His optic ridges drew together. “But what are you doing here?”

“I was actually a spy on the Nemesis for the Madam, until I was seriously injured by the Autobots and had to return here.”

Dreadwing actually seemed surprised. “Did Soundwave know?”

“He only just started to suspect after I asked the CRC to protect Breakdown.”

“So that was your doing… I guess I should thank you. Breakdown, while not the brightest, is still a good commander.”

Ucon smiled. “Yes, he is.”

“So, why is he here now?” Dreadwing asked Liliy.

“I asked him and his partner to escort you back to the Nemesis,” she answered. “And, you should fail, they will bring back your corpse for burial.”

Dreadwing raised an optic ridge. “His partner?”

Whiskey materialized behind Ucon.

“Oh.”
“They are very good at traversing the Nemesis unnoticed,” Liliy said. Her tone suddenly turned cold. “But if, for any reason, they come to harm due to your actions, it would be best if you did fail, otherwise I will drag you back here and cut you to pieces myself.”

Dreadwing bowed his head, knowing her threat was genuine. “I understand.”

“What are you standing around for?” demanded Knock Out of the lone eradicon who was standing outside the medbay. He gestured toward Dreadwing’s corpse that Megatron had left. “Clean this mess up!”

“Yes, sir.” The eradicon quickly entered the medbay.

While Knock Out and Starscream started arguing about Knock Out running away after Dreadwing started attacking, Breakdown watched the eradicon. There was something strangely familiar about him.

“Do you need any help?” he asked.

“That’s alright, commander,” the eradicon replied. “We have it covered.”

There it was. That voice. Breakdown knew it. And knew it well.

“...Five?”

The eradicon paused after hefting Dreadwing’s blaster and sword onto his shoulder. “Ah, that’s right. I heard you asked about my real name.” He pushed his mask up as his paintjob faded to matte black. “My name is Ucon. And it was a pleasure working with you, Breakdown.” He offered his servo.

Breakdown clasped it and smiled. “I’m glad to see that you survived, Ucon.”

“Wait.” Starscream took notice of their conversation. “Don’t tell me, you’re one of the CRC’s-!!”

Ucon brought his blaster and shot Starscream with an electro-charge. The seeker dropped to the floor, shaking as excess energy plagued his systems.

“That was so satisfying,” Ucon hummed. “I’ve been wanting to do that for a while now.”

A ground bridge opened near Dreadwing’s body. The corpse was lifted off the floor by a barely visible silhouette.

“Time to go, Ucon,” the invisible mech ordered.

Ucon turned. “On my way, dear spark.”

“Wait, Five, er, Ucon.” Breakdown reached out a servo to stop him. “You’re bonded?”

“Yes.”

“Since when?”

“Since before the Nemesis came to Earth.” Ucon smirked at their startled expressions. “It made me the perfect spy. With a partner that could turn invisible and approach the Nemesis undetected, I could communicate through the bond instead of using the comms and risk getting caught by
Whiskey pulsed urgency over their bond. [Code Red.]

Ucon glanced up and caught sight of a shadow approaching the medbay. “Speaking of…” His mask snapped shut and the visor turned red as Breakdown and Knock Out turned to see Soundwave appear in the doorway.

They looked back at the sound of the portal closing, both the eradicon and Dreadwing’s body were gone.

“Madam, most of Team Prime has left Earth,” Echo informed Liliy.

“And the Decepticons?” she asked.

“Megatron and several squads of eradicons have also gone.”

“So it’s begun.”

“What should we do?”

“Nothing. Unless Earth is in danger, we will not interfere.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The kids called up Liliy after Ratchet hung up on them. She rushed over right away and they decide to hang out in town.

“Do you know where the Autobots are right now?” asked Jack.

They were sitting at a table in a secluded corner of the park.

“They’re all on Cybertron right now,” Liliy answered. “Except Ratchet of course.”

“They… They left without telling us?” cried Miko.

Liliy pulled her into a hug. “They had to. Megatron was already headed there with the Omega Keys so they had to go and stop him. Don’t worry. I’m sure they’ll be back.”

“Hey, Liliy. If they succeed in reviving Cybertron, will you be leaving too?” Raf inquired.

Liliy frowned. “I hadn’t really thought about it. I might go and help with the reconstruction if they need it but there really isn’t anything left for me there anymore. And I’ve become quite fond of Earth, to be honest.”

A large shadow suddenly blocked out the sun. They all looked up at the faceless Con looming over them.

“Scrap!” four voices hissed in unison.

The Autobots took a defensive stance as Megatron landed at the edge of the Omega Lock.
“Autobots, I would suggest that you put a halt to your task and hand over those keys,” he informed them.

“And why would we do that?” Smokescreen asked.

A bridge opened behind Megatron and Starscream appeared, followed closely by Soundwave, Knock Out, and Breakdown. All four of them each carried a large, glass pod. And each pod contained a human.

“So that I may hand over the humans,” Megatron answered, gesturing to the pods.

“And if we refuse?” Optimus asked carefully.

“Allow me to show you.” Megatron turned to Soundwave who was holding Raf. “Open the pod!”

“NO!” Liliy shouted before Soundwave even moved. “If you have to kill one of us as a demonstration, let it be me. They are just children.”

Megatron considered her for a moment. “Hm. Very well.” To Breakdown who was carrying her, “Open her pod.”

“But-” Breakdown started.

“It’s alright,” Liliy said, looking up at Optimus. “I’m ready.”

Breakdown reluctantly opened the pod and Liliy dropped out. She fell to her knees, mimicking how a human would choke on the poisonous atmosphere. After a few heavy, choking gasps, her eyes rolled into the back of her head and her body flopped over, lifeless. The children for their part were very good actors. They yelled and cried and pounded on the glass. The Autobots were also highly disturbed by her performance.

“There now.” Megatron sounded supremely satisfied. “If you refuse, that will happen to the children as well.”

“Hm, hm. Would you like to join your friend, Jack?” asked Starscream, running his claws down Jack’s pod.

Jack grimaced at the screeching sound, but he turned to the seeker. “Go ahead. The Autobots were prepared to sacrifice themselves for my planet. I’ll do the same for theirs.”

“Me too! Creepy!” Miko snapped at Knock Out.

Raf gulped nervously. “Mhm.”

Megatron smirked at Optimus, knowing that he had won this. “Perhaps we should oblige them.”

“If my decision dooms the future of the Autobot cause on Cybertron, so be it. But I will not let another of our human allies die here.” Optimus stabbed the Star Saber into the ground and stepped back to stand with the rest of the Autobots.

Arcee growled but deactivated the Apex armor she was wearing and tossed it over to the Star Saber. The rest of the Autobots reluctantly tossed over their relics as well, save for the keys.

“Now, if you please. The Omega keys.” Megatron reacted out with his mismatched servo. “One at a time.”
Knock Out stepped up with Miko and beckoned to Bulkhead. “You first, big boy.”

Bulkhead hesitated and looked to Optimus one last time for confirmation. The Prime looked back at him and nodded. Bulkhead slowly crossed the space.

“If I don’t get the girl, I’ll make you eat this key.” Bulkhead slapped the key into Knock Out’s open servo.

“You’re welcome.” Knock Out handed Miko over.

“Get scrapped!” Miko yelled at Knock Out as Bulkhead carried her away.

Bumblebee was next, approaching as Bulkhead went back. Soundwave silently held out Raf and his empty servo. Bumblebee handed the key over with an angry beep and took Raf.

“If this human was important enough to entrust with the key to Vector Sigma,” Megatron gestured to Jack, “he’s worth-”

“No,” Prime suddenly interrupted.

Megatron smirked. “What’s this, Optimus? Suddenly changing your mind?”

“No,” he said again as he took the Omega key from Smokescreen. He crossed the space himself and surprised everyone by approaching Breakdown. Optimus held out the key to him. Breakdown took it with a look of deep suspicion. Then Optimus knelt and gently picked up Liliy’s limp form. He cradled her to his chassis as he moved back to the others.

Megatron frowned. “I see. Four keys for four humans. Even if the one is lifeless.”

Arcee sighed, understanding. She crossed the space and held out the last key to a bewildered Starscream. He took it silently and handed over Jack. As soon as she had him though, a bridge appeared and eradicons came pouring out. They surrounded the Autobots, their blasters ready.

The Decepticons took the keys and moved over the center of the Lock.

“Now bear witness as a new era dawns on Cybertron,” Megatron boasted as he inserted the key he took from Breakdown.

The others inserted their keys as well and the Omega Lock powered up.

“Behold! The Age of the Decepticons!” roared Megatron as energy surged to the top of the Lock.

Megatron pressed a button on the controls that appeared before him and activated the Lock. A beam shot from the pool of cybermatter at the top of the Lock and hit a ruined building in the distance. The beam persisted until the building completely restored.

“By the Allspark,” Optimus swore softly.

“Wow,” beeped Bumblebee.

“Whoa,” breathed the children.

“Instant home makeover,” added Miko.

“Shiny!” Knock Out exclaimed.
“You have what you want, Megatron,” said Optimus. “This conflict is between Autobots and Decepticons. Allow me to return the humans to Earth.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t recommend it,” replied Megatron. “They’ll be far safer here.” To Starscream, “Is the space bridge locked on target?”

Starscream bowed. “Per your instructions, Lord Megatron.”

“Excellent. Why rule only one world, when I can rule two.”

A space bridge opened above the Lock. Megatron activated the Lock once more and a pillar of energy shot into the bridge. The bridge in earth’s orbit opened and the pillar descended toward Nevada. But unbeknownst to the Cons, another bridge between the two planets opened before the energy could touch the surface.

“If the Omega Lock can restore Cybertron, it’ll do the same to Earth, right?” asked Miko.

“No,” answered Optimus. “It will cyberform your planet in favor of its new matrix, destroying all indigenous life in the process.”


Optimus clenched his free servo into a fist.

The limp form he still held to his chassis suddenly shifted and a small hand pressed against his plating.

{Optimus, wait. Not yet.} Liliy’s voice filtered thru his private comms.

[But Earth is in danger!] he replied.

[No it’s not. Not yet.]

[What?] He glanced down at her. Aside from the hand on his plating, she still appeared as lifeless as when he picked her up.

{Just give another minute. The other bridge is not going to hold. But we need to get as much energy across as possible.}

The children’s cries stopped him from asking what she meant.

“No!”

“Stop it!”

“Leave our planet alone!”

Megatron just laughed.

[Liliy, I cannot wait much longer.]

{You don’t have to. The bridge just collapsed. Earth is now being effected.}

Optimus didn’t hesitate. Depositing Liliy on his shoulder, he transformed his servo into a blade and took out the nearest eradicon. Then he ran for the Star Saber.
Liliy took that chance to transform and drop into the gap between the layers of armor on Optimus’ back. There, she settled in and hung on for what she knew was going to be a bumpy ride.

Grabbing the Star Saber, Optimus twisted and took out the three eradicons that had followed him. Roaring, Megatron took the dark Star Saber from his back and rushed at Optimus. Optimus ran forward to meet him. The sabers clashed, energy rippling around the two mechs. As they pulled apart to attack again, Optimus recovered faster. With a burst of speed that was fueled by his need to protect, he brought the saber down with both servos, severing Megatron’s mismatched arm at the elbow. Optimus moved forward, pushing Megatron aside as the dark Star Saber stuck into the ground several feet away, the stolen servo still holding the hilt.

Prime rushed for the Lock. The four Decepticon officers tried to defend it. Soundwave, Knock Out, and Breakdown with their blasters while Starscream stepped forward and fired a missile at him. Optimus blocked the blasts with his saber and then twisted to avoid the missile. He leapt and used Starscream’s face as a springboard to increase the height of his jump before he brought the Star Saber down on the Lock.

It exploded.

“Well done, Optimus,” Liliy said as the smoke started to clear.

“Yes. But now I have doomed our planet,” Optimus replied, somewhat regretful.

“Hmm. Perhaps.”

Optimus was again interrupted before he could question Liliy. This time it was his comm.

{Optimus, can you read?}

“Ratchet, please open a space bridge.”

Liliy dropped off Prime’s back as he joined the other Autobots and they entered the portal that Ratchet sent for them, leaving her there.

She spotted Starscream moving around. And there was Knock Out and Breakdown.

“I guess we should cancel the welcome home party,” said Knock Out.

Starscream smacked him hard, sending him stumbling back into Breakdown.

“Attend to our master,” Starscream ordered. “He requires medical attention.”

Knock Out quickly ran over to Megatron with Breakdown following. Starscream turned to glare at the disappearing space bridge.

“Prime! He will pay for dooming Cybertron to remain a lifeless husk!” he shouted.

He looked back when Megatron started laughing. Knock Out and Breakdown backed away as the warlord got to his peds, his evil laugh rising in volume.

“They can run,” Megatron exclaimed. “But they can never again run home.”

Liliy realized then that someone was missing. Where was Soundwave? She spread her spark detection as far as it would go. He was behind-?! Before she could even turn, something slammed into her and her world went black.
“Woo! Ha ha!” Wheeljack laughed as X-ray leveled out the Jackhammer’s flight path. “That was some fancy flying, X. You’re a fast learner.”

“Well, you know...” X-ray glanced over at him from the pilot’s seat. “I had an excellent teacher.”

Wheeljack grinned. “Yeah, ya did.”

“Anything else you want to teach me?”

“Let me see.” Wheeljack reached over and set the autopilot. Leaning closer still, he gently caught X-ray’s chin and made him look at him. “I can think of a thing or two.”

“Oh, really?” X-ray let Wheeljack pull him closer. “And what might that be?”

Wheeljack just hummed in answer, tilting his helm to accommodate for the protrusion on his forehelm. Their lips barely brushed when the long range scanners suddenly came screeching to life and startled them both.

“What was that?” X-ray asked as Wheeljack turned off the alarm and checked the scanner.

Wheeljack studied the readings. “A strange energy surge. It’s huge.”

“Where? And from what?”

“No idea but it’s not far from Omega One.”

“Well then, let’s go check it out.”

Wheeljack finally looked up at him. “Are you sure you’re allowed to?”

“Why not?” X-ray slipped out of the pilot’s seat and stepped back so Wheeljack could move over. “We’re just doing a little investigating, right?”

Wheeljack smirked. “Well, when you put it that way.” He moved over to the pilot seat and took over the controls.

X-ray plopped down in the passenger seat he just vacated. “If it goes badly, I’ll just explain to the Madam that I was the one who suggested it.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

The Autobots returned to Earth. Ratchet was very upset to find out that Optimus had destroyed the Omega Lock.
“Right decision or wrong, what’s done is done,” Arcee argued after Ratchet finished his angry rant. “But we have another problem here on this world. The Cons just changed the rules when they put Jack, Miko, and Raf into play.”

“And Liliy!” cried Miko.

“Yeah,” agreed Jack. He looked around. “Where is Liliy, anyway?”

“Last I saw, Optimus still had her,” said Raf.

“Wait. Liliy was there too?” Ratchet asked.

“Liliy let go of me before I entered the space bridge,” replied Optimus. “I assume she remained behind on Cybertron.”

“With the Cons?” gaped Arcee.

“How did she end up there in the first place?” questioned Ratchet.

“The Cons captured her too when they took us,” answered Jack. “She was pretending to be human and hanging out with us in town when they came.”

“If it wasn’t for her, I might be dead now,” added Raf, hugging himself and shivering. Miko hugged him too while Jack just put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“Still, she did say some strange things that I wanted to ask her about,” Optimus said, thoughtfully. Ratchet frowned. “Like what?”

The comm beeped before Prime could answer. Agent Fowler appeared on the monitor.

{Prime! The Pentagon’s preparing to go DefCon 1. I need to know what we’re dealing with!}

Optimus stepped forward, confused. “To what do you refer, Agent Fowler?”

{Maybe you should step outside and see for yourselves.} And cut the feed.

“Ratchet, watch the children,” Optimus commanded before turning to go outside.

The fighting force of Team Prime took the lift to the top of the silo. Light from the afternoon sun streamed in as the big silo doors opened above them. The sight that greeted them as they reached the top made their energon run cold. In the distance loomed a tower fortress that did not belong to that world, the design being unmistakably similar to the Decepticon citadel back on Cybertron. Dark Mount!

Agent Fowler landed his helicopter nearby and got out to talk to the Autobots.

“Megatron has managed to accomplish the first phase of his cyberforming of Earth,” Optimus spoke before Fowler could ask anything. “The construction of his fortress.”

“In Jasper, Nevada? I don’t get it. I already had the town evacuated. Why here?” Fowler wanted to know.

Bumblebee pointed. “Hey. Look at that.”
The Nemesis appeared out of the clouds that were gathering and hovered between them and the tower.

Optimus finally replied Fowler even though the answer should have been obvious. “Because the Decepticons have discovered the location of our base.”

Suddenly several flyers took off from the warship’s flight deck and headed straight for them, Starscream leading as they opened fire. A wave of insecticons followed. The Autobots fended them off for a bit but the attack was becoming too much.

“Autobots, into the base,” Optimus ordered.

As the Autobots retreated to the lift, Bulkhead happened to glance over and see Fowler getting back into his helicopter.

“Fowler, what are you doing?” Bulkhead yelled at him.

“My job, two-ton,” Fowler yelled back.

The silo doors closed over the Autobots while Fowler took off to attack the Cons.

“What’s happening?” demanded Jack when the rest of the Autobots came back.

“What is going on out there?” echoed Ratchet, turning to Optimus.

The whole base was shaking from the constant rain of blaster fire.

“The Decepticons have invaded Jasper,” answered Optimus.

“And Fowler seems to think he can hold ‘em off,” added Bulkhead.

{Prime, reinforcements just arrived.} Fowler commed.

Optimus shook his helm, frustrated. “Agent Fowler, your military cannot prevail against the-”

{You didn’t think we were going to let Team Prime have all the fun, did you?} interrupted a new voice.

“Ha HA! It’s Jackie!” cheered Bulkhead.

“Wheeljack? But how did you-?” asked Ratchet.

{Picked a strange energy surge. Hope you don’t mind the company.}

“I thought you were staying with the CRC,” said Optimus. “Wheeljack, X-ray isn’t with you, is he?”

Wheeljack muted the channel. “How the slag would he know about that?”


He unmuted the channel and spoke to Optimus again, totally ignoring the Prime’s question. “Tiny
and I will hold off these Cons as long as we can. You guys need to get out of there.”

{You want us to abandon the base!} Ratchet demanded.

“He is right, Ratchet,” Optimus replied. “The base is lost. Prepare the ground bridge,” he ordered. “Bumblebee and Rafael will depart first.”

“You’re splitting us up?” gasped Raf.

“Shouldn’t we stick together?” asked Jack.

“All for one and one for all,” added Miko, clapping her hands together.

“We must disperse to avoid capture,” Optimus told them. “Until we can regroup and launch a counterattack. Survival is our only priority now.”

“Couldn’t the CRC just take them in for a bit?” Wheeljack asked after the comm was cut.

“That’s up to the Madam,” answered X-ray, holding on as Jackhammer rolled. He glanced down at one of the side monitors as they circled around. It showed that the Nemesis had moved so it was right over the base. “I hope they all make it out in time.”

“They’ll be fine, X.”

The eradicons Wheeljack was chasing suddenly veered off in two different directions.

“Starscream’s behind us,” warned X-ray.

The close range radar beeped.

“Frag! Missiles! Hang on, X!” Wheeljack tried to evade them but they still hit the Jackhammer.

There were a few explosions inside the cabin on impact. The Jackhammer trailed black smoke as it went down, crashing behind a rock formation out of sight of the base.

“Ugh.” Wheeljack groaned. He looked over at the other seat. “X...?”

His vision was blurring but he saw that X-ray was slumped over and energon was flowing down the side of his face.

“...X.” And he passed out, unaware that the earth was shaking, not from the crash, but from the exploding butte not too far away.

Megatron was overseeing the excavation of the burning ruins of the Autobot base.

“Master,” called Starscream, coming toward him followed by four vehicons dragging two prisoners between them, “look who we found, pulled from the wreckage of his ship. Wheeljack.”

“So one survived.” Megatron raised a curious optic ridge. “And who is that behind him?”

“I believe that he is one of those annoying Neutrals. He was with Wheeljack on his ship.”
“Oh? And he’s still alive? Very good. Then take our guests back to the citadel for questioning,” Megatron ordered as he turned to look up at the dark fortress. “Back to Dark Mount.”

Liliy woke up lying face down. Everything ached. Something had hit her or she ran into something, she couldn’t quite remember but she had no idea where she was now. She couldn’t see anything beyond the floor and her servo that was next to her helm. She used echolocation to determine that she was inside a cube just large enough for her to stand up in.

Something shifted outside the cube. Her vents stalled when she sensed who it was. He moved closer and it was fear alone that moved her despite the pain. She plastered her backplates against the glass wall farthest from him and brought her knees up to protect her chassis. She trembled as she stared at her reflection in Soundwave’s blank mask.

Liliy tried to activate her blade but nothing happened. She looked down at her arm and tried again. Her plates attempted to shift, moving fractionally but then they just went back into place. She dropped her helm into her knees with a ragged, sobbing vent. Soundwave reached for the cube, his thin digits clinking against the glass. She lifted her helm and screamed at him.

“GET AWAY FROM ME, YOU MONSTER!”

Soundwave pulled back, oddly shocked. Then he got a comm and left the room.

Leecher stopped moving, oddly shocked. Then he got a comm and left the room.

Alfa, who was following, stopped as well. “Something wrong, Commander?”

“It’s Liliy,” Leecher replied slowly, distractedly. “She’s fright- No... She's terrified! This feeling… It's been so long...”

Alfa frowned, worried. “Where is she?”

“She’s…” Leech checked the SDS. “On the Nemesis...”

“What?! Why is she there?!” Alfa demanded, losing his composure for a moment. “Wasn’t she just in Jasper?”

Leecher shook their helm. “We don’t know. We are trying to contact her but the comm is being blocked. Probably by Soundwave. He must know she is there.”

Alfa straighten up. “What do we do?”

“Hang on. We are going to try something. The Leecher armor will power down for a bit so don’t freak out.”

When Leech linked with Liliy for the first time, a small piece of them was left with her. It was what created their bond even though Leech did not have a spark. While Leech did not have the wide range of emotions that Liliy did, they still could tell what each other was feeling. However, unlike sparkbonds, they could only share mental thoughts when they were physically linked. On the plus side though, Leech could remotely access Liliy’s sensory net, as they were doing now.
Leech saw thru Liliy’s optics what she was seeing, that she was trapped in a glass cube. She seemed too scared out of her processor to look beyond the glass. Leech poked their bond with curiosity as if to ask why she wasn’t escaping. She looked at her servo and tried to activate her blade again. The same result as before. Her t-cog had been deactivated. She started mumbling, barely loud enough for her own audials to pick up.

“I have faith that you’ll come get me. But make sure you have a plan first. I don’t want the boys rushing blindly in and getting themselves killed. I’ll be waiting for you.” And she pushed Leech out.

The Leecher armor did power down while Leech was contacting Liliy. Alfa caught it as it started to topple over. He lowered it down so it was sitting against the wall. He knelt next to it and waited. That is where Echo found him, worried after he felt Alfa’s alarm across their bond.

“What’s wrong with the commander?” he asked, hurrying over.

Alfa looked up at him. “Apparently the Madam is on the Nemesis.” His gaze went back to Leecher. “The commander is trying to find out why.”

“What?!” Echo gaped, understanding now the reason for Alfa’s alarm.

The great flyer’s shoulders slumped as he felt Echo’s disbelief. “I know.”

“But I didn’t notice her signal while I was watching the Cons’ new place,” Echo mused.

Leecher stirred.

“Commander?” Alfa asked, reaching for them.

“She’s been captured by the Cons,” Leecher told him as he helped them stand up, “and they’ve deactivated her t-cog so she can’t escape.”

“Then let’s go get her,” declared Echo.

Leecher looked up, just then realizing that he was there too. “No. She said not to rush in blindly. We need a plan first.”

Echo’s comm beeped and he paused to listen to it. “We’ve got another problem,” he told them. “The Madam isn’t the only one who was captured by the Cons.”

“X-ray,” Leecher realized after checking with the SDS themselves. “Liliy probably doesn’t even know. Let’s go after X-ray first since his condition appears near critical. Also, track down the rest of the Autobots. Find out their conditions as well.”

“But-” Echo started.

“Liliy would want us to. You should know this, Echo,” Leecher interrupted. “Don’t make contact with them unless they need medical attention. Surveillance only.”

“Yes sir.”

“Don’t stop now,” Wheeljack huffed. He was strung up by his wrists and had just gone thru an
‘interrogation’ session with Starscream. “I was just beginning to enjoy myself.”

Starscream growled as he turned back to the Wrecker, an electric prod in servo. “Believe me, Wheeljack, there is more where that came from. And you will tell the location of your compatriots.” Wheeljack cried out when Starscream dragged the prod painfully across his chestplates, leaving deep scratches. Starscream circled around behind him. “No matter what it takes. Or how long.”

“Like I told ya,” Wheeljack replied, “they weren’t expecting me. They never bothered to fill me in. So, go ahead.” He smirked. “Knock yourself out.”

Starscream glared at him for a moment. “Well, in that case, I guess I will get started on this one over here.”

X-ray hung next to him, not quite conscious. Dried energon stained the side of his face from a wound above his left optic.

“Don’t touch him!”

Wheeljack knew he had made a mistake when a smirk spread across Starscream’s face.

“You mean like this!” Starscream stuck X-ray in the chest and activated the prod.

The mech screamed as the painful surge coursed thru his systems. Wheeljack silently cursed himself for giving the seeker ideas.

“Awake yet?” Starscream purred before striking again.

X-ray screamed again. The surge subsided but left him venting hard, his frame trying to get rid of the extra heat.

“X…?” Wheeljack worried. He hated seeing him like that.

“Don’t…” X-ray coughed. “Don’t have to worry…” He spoke slowly as if he had to concentrate on what he was saying and every word hurt him. “They’ll come for us…”

“I doubt it,” Starscream boasted. “Dark Mount is impenetrable. They will fail.”

“Heh… You’re still under-” He coughed up energon this time. “…Still underestimating us.” He looked Starscream in the optics and managed a smirk. “Screamer.”

With a snarl, Starscream struck him again.

Smokescreen sat idly on a rock not far from where Optimus was recharging on the cave floor. He had been sitting there for several hours waiting for the battered Prime to wake up. He looked up when he heard Optimus groan.

“It’s ok, Optimus,” Smokescreen said as he jumped up to rush to his side. “You’re with me, Smokescreen.”

“How did... I get here?” Optimus asked, glancing around with a barely focused gaze.

“When we were evacuating the base,” Smokescreen started explaining, “just as the Cons opened fire. It was my turn to ground bridge away. But I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t let you face Megatron’s
army alone. So I snuck back. But that’s when the blast hit. And the whole joint came tumbling
down. I managed to pull you from the wreckage before the Cons dove in. Using the phase shifter.
Which I managed to snag in all the confusion back on Cybertron.” He paused before confessing.
“I’m… I’m sorry I defied your orders.”

Optimus didn’t respond. His optics were closed again but he still appeared to be conscious.

“We’re safe here,” Smokescreen added. “But we’re down so deep, no one can pick up our signals.
I’ll have to scout above ground if we’re gonna have any hope of finding Ratchet.” He stood up and
started to turn.

“No…” Optimus’ voice stopped him. “No hope…”

“What do you mean-?”

“He’s right,” interrupted a voice from the shadows. “Ratchet was bridged too far away and he
hasn’t been moving in this direction at all.” The mech stepped out where Smokescreen could see
them.

Smokescreen gaped in surprise. “You’re...!!”

It was that dream again. All of her limbs being ripped off one by one, over and over again. She
couldn’t move. She couldn’t fight back. She could only watch. And scream.

Lily was still screaming when she came online. Soundwave rushed over to her. She curled up into
a tight ball and drew in shaky vents, trying to ignore that he was there. He opened the lid on her
cube and reached in with one of his tentacles.

“DON’T TOUCH ME!”

He hesitated just inches from her.

“Don’t touch me.” That was a quiet sob.

He withdrew his tentacle and closed the lid. She was thankful at least that he left her alone but he
was still in the room. She stayed curled up, arm around her knees and her helm down. She hoped
her boys would hurry.

“How did you find us?” Smokescreen asked Pepper after they brought Optimus back the CRC base.
The Prime was taken straight to the medbay and the medics and Leecher were working fervently to
try and save him.

“Oh, that’s right,” Pepper realized. He had led Smokescreen back to the rec room so they could
talk. “You were never told, were you? Have you heard anything about the Madam?”

“You mean the femme called Lily?” Smokescreen replied. “I’ve heard several stories from the
kids. Also, Ratchet doesn’t have a very high opinion of her.”

Pepper snorted. “That’s normal. But the children probably didn’t know about her ability.”

“Ability?”
“She has the ability to sense every living spark, shielded or not, within a certain radius,” answered Victor, who had joined them while on his break. “Our engineer built a device to amplify that ability to cover the entire planet. We call it the Spark Detection System, or SDS.”

“That’s what I used to track you after you were attacked by Megatron,” added Pepper. “And when you were taken aboard the Nemesis.”

“The SDS’s range even penetrates deep underground since that is where our base is located,” explained Victor.

“I see. But why are you just now helping us?” Smokescreen wanted to know. “Why didn’t you help us before the base was destroyed and Optimus had to sacrifice himself?”

“The Madam did not return to Earth when you did,” Lima answered, having overheard him when she came over. “It wasn’t until we found out she had been captured by Soundwave that Leecher started giving orders. By that point, your base had already been destroyed and the team scattered—”

“Wait!” Smokescreen suddenly interrupted. “Did you just say your leader has been captured by the Cons? Are you going to rescue them?”

“Yes, we will,” said Pepper. “Eventually.”

“Eventually!?” Smokescreen repeated in disbelief.

“She got a message through to us,” Lima explained. “She said not to come after her until we have a solid plan.”

“We also have someone else to rescue first,” added Victor. “Wheeljack and X-ray were captured by the Cons too.”


“You heard about him too, huh?” replied Pepper.

“They should probably hurry though,” said Lima. “A new spark signal just recently arrived at the Dark Mount. According to radio chatter, it’s Shockwave.”

Victor swore.

“Can I do anything to help?” asked Smokescreen.

“Would you mind letting us borrow the phase shifter for a while?” asked a pair of voices behind him.

Smokescreen jumped and spun around on his stool. It was the Gulf twins. “Yeah. Of course.” And handed it over.

Golf took it. “Thanks.”

“We’ll be sure to bring it back to you,” Indy called as they hurried out of the room.

Leecher stepped out of the medbay and sighed. The damage to Optimus’ frame was too extensive. There wasn’t much they could do besides make him comfortable.
“Commander.”

Leecher looked up at Echo as he approached.

“There was another spark signal that arrived on Earth around the same time as Shockwave,” the flyer informed them.

“Any identification?”

“None so far. But I believe that this one might be an Autobot as they arrived in Earth’s atmosphere via a ship and they are staying away from Dark Mount.”

“A likely possibility. If this new party approaches any of the Autobots, have whoever is running surveillance find out their identity. It is fine if they make contact.”

“Yes sir.”

“Lord Megatron, surely our Autobot prisoner is a better source of information than this primitive data net,” offered Shockwave after Starscream failed to find a clue to the Autobots’ whereabouts on the World Wide Web. “Or even the Neutral, for that matter.”

“I will have you know, Shockwave,” Starscream haughtily informed him, “that I have been grinding the both of them down for days. If they knew anything, they would have spilled it by now.”

“Some prove to be better at holding their tongues than others,” said Megatron.

“Perhaps you would have better results if, instead of a club, you used a scalpel,” suggested Shockwave. “I recommend a cortical psychic patch.”

Soundwave beeped. Megatron turned to him. Live surveillance feed appeared on his visor. Two annoyingly familiar mechs, identical flyer frames, were in the room with the prisoners.

“What!” Megatron snapped. “Send troops there immediately and let me hear what’s going on.”

Moving to take Starscream’s place at the console, Soundwave transferred the video feed to the monitor. It came up with audio as well.

:: [How did you guys get in here?] Wheeljack asked after they released him from the shackles.

[Borrowed the phase shifter.] answered one of the flyers as they released the unconscious X-ray and laid him gently on the floor. ::

“So that’s where it went,” commented Knock Out. “I was looking for it.”

:: [Damn. Looks like Screamer didn’t learn his lesson.] said the other as he helped his brother perform a bit of first aid. ::

Megatron glanced curiously over at the seeker. “What lesson?”

“Ahaa,” Starscream just laughed nervously.

:: [Some of that was from the crash.] Wheeljack told them.
[Yes but Starscream still hurt him, didn’t he?]

Both of the flyers turned and looked directly at the camera.

[Starscream, in case you’re watching...] Blasters were activated.

[...This is for you.] And they shot out the camera. ::

“Oh dear, it seems you’ve made quite an enemy, Scream,?” drawled Knock Out.

“Soundwave, is there another camera in there?” demanded Megatron.

Soundwave quickly typed a command. The feed came up from a different angle.

:: [We should hurry. They’re coming.] said one of the flyers.

[Can’t we bridge out?] asked Wheeljack.

[Not from here. Stand up. We’re going to run.]

Wheeljack got to his peds, albeit slowly. [Run?]

One flyer picked up X-ray while the other grabbed Wheeljack by his back armor. Both their visors flickered to red. They moved together so their bodies phased thru each other.

[That’s right... Run.]

And they were gone from the room just before the vehicons came storming in. ::

“Find them!” roared Megatron.

They ran in a straight line, phasing through everything. Finally, they reached a hallway and slowed down.

“This is it,” said Indy, separating from his brother and letting go of Wheeljack for a moment.

“This is what?” asked Wheeljack, a bit off kilter from moving at hyperspeed.

“The outside wall. The shielding on the fortress messes with the ground bridge so we had to get as close to the edge as possible for the signal to get thru.”

“Better hurry. They’re coming again,” warned Golf. He was still princess carrying an unconscious X-ray.

Indy placed a round device--a transmitter, Wheeljack realized--on the wall. A moment later, a ground bridge opened. Indy grabbed ahold of Wheeljack again.

“Let’s go.” And they ran through.

After they were gone and portal disappeared, the transmitter exploded, leaving a scorch mark as its only evidence.

They took X-ray straight to the medbay upon arrival. Wheeljack, on the other hand, insisted he
needed to leave. He needed to go meet up with Bulkhead right away.

“Wheeljack, you need to go to the medbay too,” pressed Indy, putting a servo on his arm.

“I’m fine,” Wheeljack snapped, shaking off his servo. “I need to go.”

“What about X-ray?”

“I-” He looked away with a growl.

“It’s fine,” Leecher interrupted, entering the receiving room. “Let him go.” To Wheeljack, “Just make sure you stay out of trouble, ok?” They put a servo on his shoulder. “For his sake?”

“I’ll do my best but the way things are out there...” He trailed off.

“I understand. Do you need anything before you go?”

Wheeljack grinned. “A box of grenades, if you’ve got some.”

After Wheeljack left, Indy turned to Leecher. “You didn’t tell him about Optimus and Smokescreen. He could have delivered the news to the other Autobots.”

“He was in such a rush, we figured it could wait,” replied Leecher. “They’ll find out eventually.”

“What about rescuing the Madam?” asked Golf.

“We’re still working on it.”

Wheeljack had them bridge him a few miles away from the rendezvous point, just in case. He dropped to his tires and slammed the accelerator, hoping that he could speed away from the guilt that was gnawing at him. He was blaming himself for letting X-ray get involved. His only relief at the moment was knowing that X-ray was safe and in good servos. Seeing the mech hurt like that was worse than any of the physical pain Starscream’s tortures had inflicted on him. And he hated it.

Drifting around a curve, Wheeljack caught sight of Bulkhead barreling down the hillside toward the road. At least, he seemed to be fine. Wheeljack came to a stop and transformed just as Bulkhead reached the road.

“Ha HAA! Jackie!” Bulkhead bumped into him and then grabbed him up in a big bear hug. “Where ya been, buddy?”

“Catching up with a few old dance partners,” Wheeljack groaned over the sound of his own plating doing the same. A quiet click of a camera caused him to look down and spot Miko taking a picture of him before Bulkhead let him go. Glad that she seemed fine too, he smiled at her. “Good to see you, kid. Safe to assume we’re the only three Wreckers around?”

“So what are we waiting for?” Miko pocketed her phone and punched the air. “Let’s do some damage.”

“What’s our next move, Jackie? Circle back to base?” asked Bulkhead.
“There is no base. Cons blasted it to dust,” Wheeljack replied.

“Then what should we do?” Miko wanted to know.

“I got ahold of some munitions on my way here.” Wheeljack dropped to his tires again. “Why don’t we go make some noise?”

Jack glanced down at Arcee’s mirror again. “That car is still following us.”

“Yeah. I know,” Arcee replied. “Every time I slow down, they slow down too so the distance between us stays the same. But judging by the color and the fact that they are only tailing us and not attacking, I think it is Romeo.”

“Romeo?”

“CRC surveillance.”

Jack sighed in relief. “So Liliy hasn’t totally neglected us.”

“No,” agreed Arcee. “Even when we were out trying to collect the Omega keys, they were still watching over us.”

“Speaking of keys,” Jack mused, “the last time things looked this bleak, Optimus slipped me that key card. Something we could hang our hopes on.”

“I know you’re feeling helpless, Jack. This doesn’t need to be your burden.”

A strange spaceship suddenly passed over them, flying low. It startled them.

“Whoa!” Jack yelled over the engine noise and wind.

Arcee skid to a stop as the ship circled around and came down to land on the road in front of them. Jack dismounted and took off his helmet while staring at the ship that was clearly of Cybertronian design. Arcee transformed and moved ahead of him.

“Stay behind me,” she commanded.

A hatch-lift open and lowered, mist bellowing everywhere and obscuring the identity of the lift’s only occupant. Arcee brought out her blasters and pointed them at the bot, ready to fight if need be. But as the mist cleared and the bot came closer, Arcee recognized him and raised her blasters.

“Jack, I don’t think we’re gonna need that key card.”

Jack stared, wide-eyed, up at the huge mech that looked oh-so-similar to Optimus but very different at the same time.

“Meet Ultra Magnus,” Arcee told him.

Jack gulped and gave a nervous smile when the mech’s stern gaze fell on them.

“No one’s seen or heard from you since Cybertron went dark,” Arcee spoke up a little excitedly as she approached the tall mech. “How did you find your way to Earth?”

“Soldier,” Ultra Magnus replied sternly. “We may not be on Cybertron, but military protocol
remains.”

Arcee stiffened. “My apologizes,” and snapped to attention. “Sir.”

Jack frowned. “Sir?”

“Advise the native life form to watch its tone as well,” said Ultra Magnus.

“What?” gaped Jack. “Who is this guy?”

Arcee turned and bent so she was closer to Jack’s level. Speaking quietly, she explained, “Ultra Magnus was Optimus’ key lieutenant during the war back on Cybertron. Very by the book. Just go with it.” And she straightened back up.

“As for you broader question,” Ultra Magnus finally answered. “My story is that of all Autobots since the Exodus. I wandered the spaceways in search of others, reuniting with some, often only to see them fall at the servos of the Decepticons.”

“Until you detected the Omega beam and followed it here,” finished Arcee.

“If you’re referring to the massive energy burst originating from Cybertron, that would be affirmative,” he replied. “Upon my arrival, it became evident that this planet had been invaded. My scanners also detected Autobot life signals, yours being in closest proximity to my position.”

“Signals… as in plural?” Jack asked.

Ultra Magnus glared down at him.

“Sir,” he added quickly.

“Five total,” the mech answered.

Jack frowned. “Out of seven.”

“Jack, that doesn’t necessarily mean what you’re thinking,” Arcee reassured him. “Autobot signals can’t be detected when they’re shielded.”

“By the way, I did not pick a signal from that vehicle over there. Do you know it?”

Arcee looked where Ultra Magnus pointed and saw that Romeo was much closer than he had been before and she wondered how he had snuck up on them.

“I do, sir,” she said.

“Is it a friend or foe?”

“More like a neutral guardian.”

“Just trying to get a name to go with the spark signature,” Romeo suddenly spoke up. “Nothing more. But to ease your worries, little one,” speaking to Jack, “the last I checked those last two sparks were still active.”

Jack started. “When was that?”

“Umm…” Romeo had to check the timestamp on his last message. “Five minutes ago.”
“Do you know where they are?” asked Arcee.

“That, I can’t tell you.”

“If that is all, then we should be going,” said Ultra Magnus, turning to head back to his ship.

“Yes sir,” Arcee replied.

“Have fun with the Stiff, Arcee,” Romeo called.

Arcee flinched when Ultra Magnus spun back around to glare at the dark red Zonda. Romeo just honked twice as he whipped around, tires kicking up dust, and took off in the direction that they had come from.

Liliy didn’t know when she fell asleep again but when she came online, Soundwave’s spark signal was underneath her and way, way too close. She realized she was curled up on Laserbeak who was attached to the mech’s chassis. Soundwave’s servo was cupped around her so she didn’t dare move.

The mech was in recharge. She could tell by his even vents and slowed spark pulse. Honestly, she was slightly concerned at the fact that she wasn’t spazzing out right now. She seemed calmer than before and her thoughts were more rational and clear. Did Soundwave do something? She shifted to see if she could look around the room.

Laserbeak twitched underneath her and Soundwave’s mask lit up. His servo shifted closer to her as he lifted his helm to look at her. She remained frozen, staring back at him.

“Laserblade: feeling better?” he inquired softly in his own voice.

So he had done something.

“I told you not to touch me!” she managed to snap, albeit in a whisper.

“Apologies.”

His servo moved away. Liliy yelped when he picked her up suddenly with his tentacle. He carried her across the room without even sitting up and deposited her in the cube. He snapped the lid shut and retracted his tentacle, promptly going back into recharge.

Liliy on the other hand was now wide awake. She got to her peds and actually took in her surroundings beyond the cube for the first time. Soundwave’s quarters, for that is where she was, were a little bigger than the officer’s quarters they had given to Orion Pax during his short stay. The extra space was taken up by some storage compartments and a small table next to the berth.

There was a shelf too, above the berth. It held a collection of sculptures. Most of them were of earth cats, the biggest being a life-size metal sculpture of a panther ready to pounce. It was painted a sleek black and its yellow glass eyes seemed to watch her every move.

Liliy glanced at the sleeping mech and remembered that he had had a cat-like minicon back then. It had deployed and tried to pursue her after she escaped from Soundwave’s grasp but he called it back before it even got close. Soundwave was more willing to let her get away than endanger Ravage. Though she wondered if she would have been able to fight the cybercat back then, in the state she was.
Liliy scanned the structure of the room and located the vents. If she could just get out of the cube, she could escape to another part of the ship so Alfa could send her a ground bridge. She put her servo on the glass and wondered if she could get enough speed and force to break it. She back up to the opposite wall and paused, staring at the mech. The noise would wake him and if she didn’t break out in one hit, he would catch her. With a sigh, she slipped to the floor and prayed to Primus that her boys would come soon.
{Um, guys? We have a problem.} Hirry’s voice filtered thru the comm as soon as Lima opened it.

“What kind of problem?” Lima asked.

{The giant, flying, fire-breathing lizard kind.}

Lima raised an optic ridge as she brought up Hirry’s location. “What? Like a dragon?”

{Yes!} Hirry snapped. {It’s a dragon type predacon and I’m pretty sure it’s after Fins!}

Sure enough, there was an unidentified spark signature at her location, along with two Autobots’. Not to mention the decent number of vehicons in a nearby mine.

“Slag! Um, hold on! Let me get Leecher.” Lima switched channels. “Leecher, Hirry is reporting that a dragon-type predacon has shown up at Bulkhead and Wheeljack’s position.”

A predacon? Showing up while we don’t have Lily? Leecher glanced down at the Prime on the med berth. It could be worse. “Alright. We’ll be right there.”

Leaving the med bay, they hurried to the Comm center.

“Hirry, tell us what’s going on,” Leecher commanded.

{The dragon is really sturdy. They’ve been blasting it. Fins tried using a grenade but it had no effect. Now, he’s leading the dragon into the energon mine that they intend to drop on it.}

The unknown signal was following Wheeljack’s as he headed straight for the knot of vehicons signals. Bulkhead’s signal was still close to Hirry’s.

“Looks we’re going to have another mess to clean up,” Leecher grumbled. To Hirry, “And what about Face?”

{He’s fine. He and his charge are waiting for Fins to come out of the mine. Oh, here he comes.}
A moment later, the sound of a massive explosion could be heard over the comm.

“And the dragon?” The signal was clearly still active but they wanted to know if the explosion did any damage or not.

{Just a moment-- You’ve got to be kidding me! There’s not a scratch on it!}

The console beeped as two more Autobot signals entered the area.

“Hirry, you’ve got incoming. Don’t worry. They’re Autobots.”

{Oh yeah! That shook the dragon up a bit. The ship’s blasters were able to stun it long enough for Face and Fins to make a run for it. They just got picked up by the ship. The dragon is going after them. And… I’ve lost sight of all of them.}

All of the signals except Hirry’s left the area on the monitor. Lima zoomed out the map to follow their movements.

“That’s fine, Hirry. We’ll just watch them from here and trust that the new mech is a good enough pilot. You-- Do you feel comfortable doing cleanup while the Madam is gone?”

{I would just be sitting around doing nothing but waiting if I came back, right? Send me Mike and Nova at least, and we’ll start cleaning up.}

“Very well, Hirry. Be careful.”

{Roger that.}

After sending the miner brothers and a couple others, like Kilo, to help Hirry, Leecher went back to the Comm center.

“Where are they now?” they asked about the Autobots.

“Seems like they lost the predacon,” Lima informed them.

“And where are they headed?”

“Projected course says…” Lima calculated the course. “The Harbinger.”

Leecher reached over and opened a channel. “Yankee, it seems the rest of the Autobots are headed your way.”

{Affirmative. I’ll keep an optic out.}

Leecher’s personal comm went off. {Commander, we need you back in the med bay.}

Their shoulders slumped knowing it was probably about Optimus since X-ray was recovering just fine. “On our way.”

“What’s wrong?” asked Smokescreen.

Even without an actual face, it was easy to tell that Leecher had bad news when they approached
the Autobot outside the rec room.

“It’s Optimus,” Leecher replied. “We’ve managed to stabilize him and keep him alive for this long but the damage to his frame is too great, he isn’t going to last. If it was any other mech, I would suggest a spark transplant, but...” They trailed off.

Smokescreen frowned. “Why can’t you do that?”

“Well, not only do we need to the Madam for the procedure,” they explained, “but also the Matrix is in the way.”


“What about it?” Leecher asked, confused, as they followed him across the main hall.

“We can use the Matrix to fix him,” Smokescreen explained, barely containing his excitement and his pace. He was getting close to running. “We just need to get the Forge of Solus Prime.”

“But that means going back to Dark Mount,” said Leecher, disapproval already coloring their voice. They were easily keeping pace with him.

“Not necessarily,” Ucon cut in. He and Whiskey happened to be passing by and heard them. They started following too. “Megatron probably is still keeping all the relics on the Nemesis.”

“Which is still at Dark Mount, Ucon,” they repeated, annoyed. They really didn’t want any of the boys going back to Dark Mount.

“Yeah, but we can bridge onto the Nemesis,” Whiskey piped up as they stopped outside the receiving room.

Leecher stared at the three of them, mulling it over. They sighed, finally giving in. “Very well. It’s the best idea we have at the moment. Ucon, Whiskey, go with Smokescreen.”

“Yessir.”

Soundwave didn’t like it. Those annoying Neutrals kept sneaking in and taking things. Not only that, but they had had a spy on the Nemesis on for years before he even noticed. That irritated him the most. They say that he has eyes and ears all over the place but in reality he is only one mech and, of the team of minicons that he once had, only Laserbeak remained. There were things that get past him. Things that he will miss. Like the two that snuck on board with Dreadwing and stole away with his corpse. He didn’t notice they were there until after Megatron killed Dreadwing. He may have noticed the twins that snuck into Dark Mount and immediately alerted Megatron but they still managed to rescue the prisoners and escape. And again, hardly an hour ago, those same two—the black eradicon and his invisible partner—snuck onto the Nemesis again. This time, with Smokescreen and stole the Forge of Solus Prime from Megatron’s vault. Soundwave didn’t notice until after they had come and gone.

Suppressing the urge to sigh, Soundwave keyed in the code to enter his quarters. He knew the little one—the Laserblade was still there because he had been monitoring her. But he was afraid they might come to take her next and he didn’t want that. He had been glad when her fear calmed down a bit after she recharged with Laserbeak but she still did not like it when he came near. Like now, he was sure that she was glaring at him even though he could not see her optics behind her visor.
Her little back was pressed against the glass as she tried to get as far away from him as possible.

“What do you want?” she snapped as he just continued to stare at her.

Soundwave was amazed. She seemed so small and frail, like a human, especially the way she feared him. But he also knew that she could easily kill a mech in an astroclick with her blade.

“If you’re not going to say anything...” She moved, almost too quickly for him to process. She crossed the space of the cube, “Then gO AWAY!” And punched the glass hard, cracks radiating out from her fist.

Soundwave jerked back, totally surprised.

Liliy felt dizzy after moving like that. And she knew why too. “Frag...” She stumbled back a few steps. “Low energon levels.” And collapsed to the floor.

She lay on her left side and stared at the floor, half curious to know how Soundwave would react now. She sensed him move across the room and back again. The lid to her cube opened and something clinked on the floor beside her. She looked up. It was an energon candy about the size of her helm.

“Thanks but could you break it into smaller pieces?” She was too exhausted to care that she was asking Soundwave for something. “It’s hard to eat that way.”

The candy was removed. A moment later it was dropped back in in several smaller pieces. Trembling a bit, Liliy pushed herself up into sitting position. She slowly picked up a piece and started munching on it. After she finished her first piece and started on the second, she glanced over at Soundwave. He was sitting on his berth, watching Laserbeak cheerfully consume a candy while sitting on his lap. He reached up then, and took off his mask. Liliy stared.

Soundwave had a narrow face with a small mouth and optics similar to Knock Out’s, but instead of one iris ring, he had two. Plus, while still classified as red, his optics had a bit of a purple shade to them.

Sensing her stare, Soundwave glanced over at her as he bit a candy in half. Liliy turned her head away just enough to make it appear that she was no longer looking at him but she was still watching him out of her peripheral as she munched on her own candy.

Soundwave had finished enjoying the other half of his candy when his comm crackled.

{Soundwave, where are you? Report to the bridge immediately!}

Liliy nearly choked on her candy when Soundwave rolled his optics at Starscream’s message. But he still acknowledged him with a ping. He popped a second candy into his mouth before replacing his mask. After having Laserbeak reattach to him and putting the container away, he came over and picked up her cube. Liliy yelped and fell over, startled by the sudden movement.

“What?” she gasped, sitting up again. “Why am I coming too?”

“Laserblade: safer with Soundwave.”

“What are you talking about?”
Soundwave did not answer as he left the room. He carried her cube close to his chassis, one arm holding her up while the other was in front to hide her from others in the hallway. But once they reached the bridge, he gestured an eradicon over, had him stand next to Soundwave’s workstation and then gave him Lily’s cube to hold. Starscream started nagging at him about surveillance duties as soon as Soundwave gave him his attention.

“Huh. He brought me along to keep me safe but then he hands me off to someone else. He really is a weird mech. Don’t you think so,” she looked up at the mech holding her, “Zuza?”

The eradicon nearly dropped her cube. As it was, he was shaking as he clutched at the glass, his claws leaving faint scratches.

“How did you know my name?” he asked quietly, more shocked than angry.

“Ucon told me.”

He tilted his helm in confusion, his grip on the glass loosening a bit. “Ucon?”

“Ah. I guess you only knew him as ZZ-05.”

Zuza made a noise, a choked sob, and hugged the cube closer.

Lily frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s just that ZZ-05 was my friend and now I’ll never see him again.”

“Why not?”

“He…” Another tiny sob, “died.”

“Oh.” Lily scratched at her cheek. “I guess for all intents and purposes the mech known as ZZ-05 is dead. But Ucon, as I know him, is very much alive.”

Zuza jerked slightly. “Huh?”

“The Autobots damaged his frame to the point that it could no longer support his spark,” Lily explained, “so we took his spark out and put it in a new frame. So ZZ-05’s frame has expired. His spark, however, lives on.”

“Really?!”

Lily smiled at the hope she picked up in Zuza’s voice. “Yes. I helped with the spark transplant myself. In fact, Ucon was here, on the Nemesis, not too long ago. I heard he shot the Screamer before stealing away with Dreadwing’s corpse.”

Zuza laughed in relief. “So he’s alive and active. That makes me so happy to hear.”

Lily laughed a little too. “I’m glad… Say, can you tell me what it was like working with him? I know from the reports that he was a bit of a troublemaker but I want to hear from you.”

“Pssh. A bit? He got in trouble with AA-00 all the time.”

Soundwave picked up the sound of quiet laughter after Starscream finally finished his rant. He glanced over and saw that the eradicon that he had entrusted the little one—the Laserblade to was
speaking quietly, but rather enthusiastically, recounting a story to her. A funny story by the way she was laughing. He moved two steps in her direction and she froze up.

“Don’t you have a job to do or something?” she spat, glaring at him over her shoulder at him.

“Ah, little one. You shouldn’t talk to the Commander like that,” chided the eradicon.

“Hmph.” She gave in and waved Soundwave away. “Go back to whatever you were doing. You’re interrupting the story.”

Soundwave hesitated and then reluctantly turned back to his workstation.

“Anyway, where were we?” He heard her ask.

“The only signals Ultra Magnus was able to isolate are standing right here,” Arcee told Fowler once the remains of Team Prime were reunited. “But we did hear from one of the CRC that the other two are still alive.”

“If they know that, maybe they can tell us where they are,” said Wheeljack.

“Where are you going?” Ratchet demanded as Wheeljack moved over to the canyon wall.

“Hey, Yankee! You still up there spying on us?” the Wrecker yelled up. He had glimpsed the mech on the top of the canyon when they landed.

Everyone watched the top of the cliff. A peach and green copterbot appeared and looked over the edge at them.

“Ya got any idea where Prime and the new kid are?” Wheeljack called.

Yankee jumped down. He landed with a heavy thud and pushed his mask up as he straightened. “If you hadn’t been in such a hurry to leave, you would have been able to see them yourself,” he said to Wheeljack.

Wheeljack started. “They’re at your base??”

“Yes.”

Hearing that, the others hurried over.

“Are they both alright?” demanded Arcee.

“Smokescreen is fine,” Yankee answered.

“And Optimus?” Ratchet asked, worried.

Yankee hesitated, looking Ratchet in the optic. “...Critical.”

Ratchet sagged a bit and lowered his helm. “No...”

“I’m sorry.”

“What about X?” Wheeljack asked quietly after stepping closer to Yankee.

Yankee leveled a glare at him. “Why should I tell you?”
“Because. He’s-” He turned away. “Nevermind.”

“What is Liliy doing?” asked Miko from somewhere at the Bots’ peds. “Doesn’t she have a way to save Optimus?”

Yankee sighed. “The Madam… was captured by Soundwave before she could return to Earth.”

“What?!” shrieked several voices at once.

“Liliy was captured?” Raf cried.

“Is she ok?” added Jack.

Yankee knelt to see them better. “We know that she is alive and that her t-cog and comms have been deactivated. We also know that she is on the Nemesis but we cannot get to her because of Soundwave.”

“You’re gonna get her back, right?” Miko wanted to know.

Yankee smirked dangerously. “Of course. We’ll make Soundwave sorry he even took her.”

“I have a question,” Ultra Magnus interrupted. He was the only one who had hung back when the others gathered around Yankee. He was incredibly wary of this new mech who was apparently spying on them. But the others were not bothered him or his vehicon mask. That really put him on edge. That mask usually meant Decepticon.

Yankee looked up at Ultra Magnus as he finally joined the group. He got his peds. “Yes?”

“Who are you?”

“Yankee, CRC Surveillance team.” His comm beeped at him. “Ah. Just a second. I have to take this.” To his comm as he stepped away from the group, “Yes?”

{Yankee, you weren’t supposed to make contact,} said Leecher.

“Sorry. Fins asked me a question.” He glanced over at the white mech who was listening to the others chat. “I figured it was ok since it was him.”

{What did he want to know?}

“The status of Red Leader and Skidmarks.”

{Very well. Can you continue to watch them?}

“The new guy is pretty wary of me. I don’t think I can stay close without being interrogated.”

{Ah. Romeo did say he was extremely stiff. Go ahead and return then. They should be fine as long as they stay together. We’ll keep an optic on them from here.}

“Roger.” And ended the call.

“Hey, hey,” said a voice near his peds. “Who were you talking to just now? Was that your boss?”

Yankee looked down at Miko. He knelt and offered her his servo to get on. She didn’t even hesitate. She jumped up and sat cross-legged on his palm.
“Yes. That was my boss,” he said as he lifted her. He walked over and passed her off to Bulkhead.  “I’m afraid I’ve been recalled to base.”

“It wasn’t my fault, was it?” asked Wheeljack.

“Technically, yes.” Yankee laid a servo on his shoulder and leaned in to whisper, “Try not to make him worry, ‘kay?”

Then Yankee took three running strides away before transforming and taking to the air.

Leecher met Smokescreen’s group in the receiving room when they returned with the Forge of Solus Prime.

“Smokescreen, it’s good you’re back. Optimus has been asking for you.”

Smokescreen hurried with Leecher to the medbay. Ucon followed after with Whiskey who was hauling the Forge.

“Smokescreen?” Optimus rasped when they entered.

Smokescreen went over to him and laid a servo on his arm. “I’m here, Optimus. We went and got the Forge. We can use it to fix you up.”

Optimus coughed and gasped. “No.”

“What? Why not?”

“The power of the Forge is not unlimited,” Optimus struggled to explain. “Its energy has already begun to ebb.”

“So it’s running low,” Smokescreen replied quietly. “Who cares? All we need is enough juice to get you back into fighting shape.”

“Whatever power remains must be used to rebuild the Omega Lock,” Optimus told him, “to restore Cybertron.”

“But would mean…” Smokescreen trailed off.

“The fate of all our kind is more vital than that of any one of us. Including me.”

“But, Optimus. The Forge is a relic of the Primes. We can’t use it to restore Cybertron. Not without a Prime. Not without you.”

“There will be a new Prime,” Optimus rasped.

“You can worry about that after we get you fixed up and we take down Megatron,” Smokescreen replied, pulling back and turning to Whiskey.

Optimus grasped Smokescreen’s arm, stopping him. “Smokescreen. The time for a new leader is upon us. In my spark, I believe that leader stands before me right now.”

Smokescreen jerked back, stumbling against the medical berth behind him, too shocked to speak. Optimus regarded him for a moment with dim optics before the exhaustion overcame him and he had to lay his helm back.
It took Smokescreen several minutes to process the information that he, Smokescreen, *the rookie*, could be the next Prime. He let out a long sigh and dragged his servo over his faceplates.

“I-I can’t do this.” He gestured vaguely. “I mean, sure, who wouldn’t wanna be a Prime-?”

“Me,” Ucon offered quietly.

“Me either,” agreed Whiskey.

“No thanks,” added Foxtrot.

“Not helping,” Smokescreen hissed at them. He stepped closer to Optimus again. “Optimus, I’m really not ready for that kind of responsibility.”

“Smokescreen, the choice is neither yours nor mine to make,” Optimus replied slowly. “When it is time, the Matrix of Leadership will present itself only to one whose spark is worthy.” Optimus paused for a long moment, his optics starting to flicker. “Who stands before me?” he gasped suddenly, staring straight ahead.


“Who beckons?” Optimus rasped again.

Smokescreen touched his arm. “Optimus?”

Leecher stepped forward and checked Optimus vitals. “He’s fading. There’s nothing we medics can do for him now.”

“Optimus, no!” Smokescreen cried as the light suddenly faded from Prime’s optics. He stepped back when Optimus’ chestplates shifted open to reveal the Matrix of Leadership. He just gaped at it. “This isn’t how the story’s supposed to end.”

“Smokescreen, what are you going to do?” Leecher asked from the other side of the med berth.

Smokescreen jerked his helm up to stare at them. “He said we had no choice.”

“You always have a choice.” Foxtrot came over and laid a servo on his shoulder. “But, for the record, if it were us and he was Liliy, we would save him.”

“Also, for the record,” Whiskey hefted the Forge off his shoulder and set it down next to the med berth, “Cybertron’s future is not as bleak as he thinks it is.”

“But the choice is still up to you, Smokescreen,” Leecher said. “If you don’t think you’re ready…” Smokescreen looked down at Optimus and made his decision, determined. “I will save him.” And put Optimus’ servo on top of the Forge.

Liliy didn’t really pay much attention to what was going on the bridge. Starscream and Soundwave were running surveillance while Megatron and Shockwave were discussing something at another station. That’s about all she paid attention to while listening to Zuza, quietly but happily, talk about Ucon.

That was until she picked up Jack’s voice on the Decepticon comm.
“What’s wrong?” Zuza asked when her attention fully turned to the surveillance station.

“That voice just now. It was J--” She cut herself off, suddenly realizing that she was still talking to a Decepticon, no matter how friendly he was. “It sounded familiar. But that might just be my imagination.”

“Oh. Ok. Do you want me to continue the story? We don’t have to, if you don’t want to.”

“No. That’s--”

Both of them flinched when Megatron suddenly shouted Starscream’s name.

“Explain why my forces are scattering across this globe?” he snarled.

“Renegade Autobot mischief, lord Megatron,” Starscream was quick to explain. “I am in the process of deducing how they are infiltrating our communication systems without a base of--”

Soundwave interrupted him with a beep and brought up an image of a wrecked ship on his mask.

“The Harbinger?” realized Starscream.

“You left abandoned Decepticon technology fully operational and unsecured?!” Megatron demanded, advancing on the seeker.

“Ah, uh-Allow me to correct my oversight immediately,” stuttered Starscream, shrinking back.

“It’s a diversion,” Liliy said quietly while Starscream issued ordered to his troops.

“What?” asked Zuza, confused.

“My armada is in position,” said Starscream. To Soundwave, “Open a ground bridge to the Harbinger.”

Before Soundwave could comply, two explosions shook Dark Mount in quick succession and, by extension, the Nemesis. An alert came up on the monitors.

“Since it would seem that Dark Mount is present under attack, kindly redirect all efforts toward ensuring that our invaders are eradicated,” commanded Megatron.

“Told ya,” Liliy muttered.

Another explosion shook the tower.

“I assure you, master. I have everything under control,” said Starscream.

Megatron snarled as he turned on him. Starscream jerked back, afraid.

“Lord Megatron,” interrupted Shockwave as he stepped forward. “I accept that military considerations are outside of my domain but perhaps it is once again time to release the predacon.”

“Predacon?” gasped Liliy.

“Yeah. Shockwave brought it here from Cybertron to hunt the Autobots,” Zuza explained. “But so far, it hasn’t killed any.”
“That’s good.”

“Huh?”

“Believe it or not but the Autobots here on Earth are my friends. I would hate to see any of them get killed. And, to be honest, it hurts me when I think about just how many of your friends will probably fall to the Autobots tonight.” Liliy sighed. “I really wish you guys would stop fighting.”

“Yeah,” agreed Zuza. “Me too.”

“What the slag was that?” Ucon asked as the blinding white light faded and Whiskey let go of him. He focused on the med berth. “Oh.”

The mech on the berth was Optimus Prime, but instead of just being restored, his frame had been upgraded. He had the same color scheme but he was much bulkier now. And probably taller too, but it was hard to tell by how much while he was lying down.

The upgrade had knocked off all the medical equipment that had been hooked up to him so it was saying he was still flatlining. Leecher reached over and turned the equipment off. Then they reached out and gently touched Optimus’ arm.

“Optimus?”

The Prime opened his optics and blinked up at the ceiling.

“Optimus, how do you feel?” Leecher asked.

Optimus spared a quick glance in Smokescreen’s direction before focusing on Leecher. “I feel fine.” He frowned. “Did you get smaller?”

Leecher chuckled. “No. You just got bigger. Try sitting up.”

He did as he was told. “Oh,” looking down at his arms and legs.

“Yeah,” Leecher laughed lightly. “It surprised us too. Also, please do not be upset with Smokescreen about reviving you. All of us here encouraged him to do it. And, to be honest, a crisis this big? He wasn’t ready for it.”

“Sometimes you don’t have a choice.”

“We are aware, but this time there was one.”

“What about Cybertron?”

“What about it?” At Optimus’ stare, “Didn’t Liliy tell you?”

“She never had time to explain whatever it was properly.”

“Ah... Optimus, the reason Liliy didn’t let you destroy the Omega Lock right away was because we had also opened a space bridge between the two planets. Half the energy that the Cons sent to Earth was sent back to Cybertron. To the Well of Allsparks to be exact. It was able to partially revive the heart of Primus but the effects have yet to be seen on the planet’s surface as far as we can tell. It may take some time before anything happens but Quebec and Charlie are keeping an optic on it.”
“So you’re saying…?”

“Even without the Omega Lock and the Forge of Solus Prime, there is still hope for Cybertron.”

Optimus’ shoulders sagged and he hid his face with a servo. “So we didn’t doom our home. I’m glad.”

“But that comes to our next problem.”

Optimus lowered his servo and looked at Leecher again.

“Right now your team is attacking Dark Mount-”

“They’re what? Attacking the Cons without us?” demanded Smokescreen.

“At present,” Leecher continued, “they aren’t faring too well and are likely going to be captured soon. If you are feeling up to it, we can send you to help them. Also, we’ll use your assault to distract the Cons while we rescue Liliy.”

Optimus started. “She was captured?!”

“Yes. Apparently she was captured by Soundwave while they were on Cybertron. We have been waiting for a good time to get her back since she ordered us to not endanger the ‘boys’. ”

“A stupid order if you ask me,” said Foxtrot. “She should know we would all risk our lives for hers.”

“That is exactly why she made the order,” countered Leecher. “The Leecher armor is expendable, you guys are not.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Foxtrot waved them off grumpily.

“So, do we have your help, Optimus Prime?” Leecher asked.

“Of course.” Optimus stood up and towered even more over them all.

“A little taller than the twins it looks like,” Leecher observed. “And just as bulky as Bravo.”

“Is that a jetpack?” Foxtrot asked.

“It seems to be,” answered Optimus, checking his systems.

“Awesome!” cried Smokescreen.

“Alright. Let’s get going,” ordered Leecher.

In the receiving room, they bridged Optimus and Smokescreen off first.

“Okay. This is it,” said Leecher to those that had gathered. “The chance we have been waiting for. While the Cons are distracted by the Autobots, we will go get Liliy.”

“Do you want any of us to go with you?” asked Echo.

“No. We alone will be enough. If we can get Liliy into the armor, we can easily escape.”
“If you can’t?” Romeo wanted to know.

“Remain on standby.”

“Yessir.”

It seemed like the Autobots had been captured from what Liliy gathered. One by one, Shockwave, Megatron, and Starscream had left the bridge. Now it was just Soundwave and a few vehicons including Zuza.

Zuza had gone quiet after the predacon had been sent away somewhere by the Autobots’ ground bridge and Shockwave went to join the battle. He had flinched when Megatron stormed out. Now he was tense, ready to jump into action should he be ordered to do so.

Liliy paid attention to the monitors to get a grasp on the situation. That’s when she suddenly felt a presence drawing near. She looked up at the eradicon.

“Hey, Zuza,” she said quietly. He looked down at her. “I had fun talking to you. I’ll be sure to tell Ucon all about it.”

He seemed to relax slightly. “Thanks.”

The presence was right outside the door.

“Also, I’m sorry. But this is going to hurt.”

“Huh?”

The door slid open. Leecher entered and Zuza was the first one they shot. The eradicon dropped the cube as electricity raked thru his systems. The cube hit the floor, one corner first, and shattered thanks to the cracks Liliy had made before. Liliy was away from the cube before all the pieces hit the floor and Zuza toppled over on top of them. Leecher grabbed one of the other vehicons they had knocked out and threw them at Soundwave to distract him while Liliy got in the armor.

Soundwave pushed the vehicon off him and got back to his peds. The strange, not-quite-vehicon mech stood waiting for him and the little one--the Laserblade was nowhere to be seen.

“Ah, finally.” Their voice was oddly layered as if two voices were speaking as one. They rolled their shoulders and smashed their right fist into their left palm. “Time for some revenge.”

Soundwave shot out his tentacles. Leecher moved, too fast for Soundwave to follow, appearing right in front of him, their fist connecting with his mask. He crashed into the console behind him, tentacles flailing about. Catching himself on the edge of the console before he slipped to the floor, he brushed his digits over the new cracks in his mask.

“What’s the matter, Soundwave?” Leecher was on the other side of the room again.

Reeling in his tentacles, Soundwave straightened up and advanced on Leecher. Halfway there, Laserbeak launched off his chassis. Leecher wasted no time bringing out their blaster and shooting the minicon down in one non-lethal hit.

“Now, now, Soundwave. This is between you and us.”

Soundwave lunged at Leecher. They blocked his strike and used his momentum to deliver a blow
to his midsection. Soundwave doubled over. Leecher brought both fists down on his back, dropping him to his knees. They finished off the beat down with a roundhouse kick to his helm that sent Soundwave sprawling.

The first thing Soundwave recognized as he came back online after being out for a few seconds was the taste of energon in his mouth. The second was that he could not see. He just knew he was lying face down. He moved his servos for leverage and pushed himself up. As he did, a few broken pieces of his mask fell out in front of one optic and he could see again just a little bit. Realizing that his apparent blindness was due to his mask failing, he reached up and touched it again. A few more pieces fell out. Sitting back on his knees, he looked up, suddenly remembering that he had been fighting someone. As far as he could see, the other mech was g-

From behind, a pair of servos clamped down on his left shoulder and arm, right next to the joint.

“Just one more thing,” the layered voice drawled in his audial as the mech began to pull on his arm.

Soundwave opened his mouth to reply but could only let out a static laden shriek when Leecher gave his arm a good, hard yank and ripped it clean off the shoulder joint, energon splattering across the floor. Venting hard, Soundwave looked up at Leecher as they moved to stand in front of him, still holding his detached arm.

“And with this,” the arm clattered on the floor at their peds, “the Laserblade’s revenge is complete.”

Soundwave stared. All that was revenge for capturing the Laserblade? ...No. He looked down at his detached arm. No, this was revenge for the time when he ripped the Laserblade’s arm off after he caught her trying to cut off Megatron’s helm. But that did not make sense to him. He thought that if it was her, she would have used her blade and killed him, the object of her fear. Why let him live?

“Our work here is done. And it seems the Autobots have been successful in theirs.” A ground bridge opened behind them. “Time to go.”

“W-wait...” Soundwave tried to stop them but they had already disappeared.

Soundwave pushed himself to his peds, teetering a bit as he stumbled to the nearest console. He grabbed the edge to steady himself when the ship suddenly shook. Warnings popped up on the monitors about structural damage to the fortress. It was collapsing.

{Soundwave,} Shockwave commed. {I require a ground bridge.}

Soundwave put in his coordinates and opened a portal. Shockwave was startled when he arrived on the bridge and found Soundwave in his battered state.

“Soundwave, what happened?”

Before he could answer, the comm crackled again. It was Starscream. {Lord Megatron is on board. Get the warship away from the fortress now!}

As there were currently no vehicons available, Shockwave quickly followed the order, taking over the controls and moving the Nemesis away from Dark Mount and into a high orbit. During that time, more vehicons did arrive to take the places of their unconscious comrades. Letting them take over, Shockwave went back to Soundwave.
The slender mech was leaning heavily on the console. A tiny bit of energon still dripped from the severed tubes in his shoulder joint. His mask was shattered to the point that it no longer worked and a few pieces had fallen out to reveal one of his red-purple optics.

“Can you walk?”

Soundwave shook his helm.

“Very well.”

Shockwave moved, easily scooping up the smaller mech bridal style. Soundwave didn’t seem to mind. Instead, he used his tentacles to grab his severed arm and Laserbeak off the floor before they left the bridge.

After they ripped off Soundwave’s arm, Liliy did not let Leech bridge them back to base. Instead, they bridged to a vacant part of the Nemesis, a storage room with no one around.

[[I’m sorry, but what’s this in your memories about sending X-ray to the medbay?]] Liliy asked, going thru images she got after linking up with Leech.

[That’s what you’re concerned about?] asked Leech. [Not Optimus dying?]

She brought up the image of Optimus’ new frame. [[He looks fine to me. What happened to X-ray?]] she demanded.

Leech sighed. [He was with Wheeljack when he went to help the rest of the Autobots. The Jackhammer was shot down. Most of his injuries are from the crash.]

[[Most? And the others?]]

[X-ray and Wheeljack were captured by the Cons. We rescued them soon after I made contact with you but…] Leech hesitated.

[[But…?]]

[...]

[[Leech.]]

[Starscream… tortured them.]

There it was again. The white. hot. fury! engulfing their bond.

Leech pushed back with urgency. [Liliy, calm down!]

[[HOW CAN I BE CALM!??]] She slammed her fist against the inside of the armor. [[YOU TRIED TO HIDE THIS FROM ME! WHY??]]

This is why! Leech pushed back the fury again. [It’s time to go home.]

[[We’re NOT leaving until we get Starscream too!]]

[We can’t get Starscream!] Leech shot back, bringing up Starscream’s location. [He’s right in the middle of the medbay with Megatron and like a dozen other Cons.]
Isn’t the reason you came alone with just the Leecher armor is because it’s expendable?

Yes, but we were only fighting Soundwave. Not the entire Decepticon command!

Leech, who do you think you are talking to? We can be fast. Go in, take them by surprise, get the job done and get out. We already eliminated our biggest threat.

What about Shockwave?

What about him?

We don’t know much about him.

Leech, just agree to do this with me or I’ll go alone and probably end up killing him.

Hhhh. Very well. Then we will go straight home, understand?

Yes. I’ve had enough of this place already and I want to see my boys.

We could go now. Leech suggested hopefully.

“Starscream first, Leech,” Liliy finally spoke aloud as Leecher headed for the door. “Starscream first.”

“Doctor, you’re needed,” Shockwave said as he entered the medbay.

“Get in line. Lord Megatron comes fir--Soundwave!?!?” When Knock Out looked up to address Shockwave and actually saw who he was carrying.

“Soundwave!?” cried Starscream.

“Soundwave, what happened to you!?” demanded Megatron as Shockwave laid the Comm officer on the med berth across from his.

“A Neutral: ...Came for the little one,” Soundwave replied quietly, not looking at any of them.

“What?? One mech did that to you?”

Soundwave did not answer. His frame went still and his optics closed.

“Knock Out!” ordered Megatron.

The medic was already moving. He quickly scanned Soundwave. “Not to worry. He only fell into stasis. Lord Megatron, your injuries are minor. Please rest while I start on Soundwave.” He didn’t wait for a reply before started ordering his helper vehicons and Breakdown around.

Megatron seemed to be fine with Knock Out’s attention shifting. Instead he growled orders. “Shockwave, Starscream. Find out who did this to Soundwave.”

“I think I know who it was, lord Megatron,” interrupted DA-01 as he was helped into the medbay by another vehicon. He flinched slightly when the warlord’s glare fell on him but he kept his voice even. “I saw the mech before they shot me. It was the commander of the Neutrals. My squad met them once before when we were fighting the Autobots.”
“You must be talking about Leecher,” realized Starscream. “That mech was the only one who never took off their mask. And when I asked about it, they just said they couldn’t.”

“You seem to know a lot about these Neutrals, Starscream,” observed Shockwave.

“Of course. I spent some time at their base while I was rogue.”

“And what exactly did you do to make them hate you so much, Starscream?” asked Knock Out, his voice slightly accusing.

Starscream shrugged. “I may have injured a couple of them when I stole the Apex Armor.”

Knock Out paused his work and looked over at him with a raised optic ridge. “And the lesson you were supposed to learn?”

“What does it matter?” Starscream snapped. “They can’t get us here.”

“Soundwave is evidence to the contrary,” replied Shockwave.

“Speaking of…” Starscream frowned. “What ‘little one’ was Soundwave talking about? Laserbeak is still here.”

“It must’ve been that minicon he picked up while we were on Cybertron,” answered Breakdown. “Soundwave had Knock Out scan her for injuries. I’ve never seen anything like her before. She had a symbol that looked,” he grabbed a datapad and drew on it, “like this.” He showed them.

Starscream gasped sharply and shrank back, almost cowering.

“That is the crest of the Laserblade clan,” said Shockwave. “But they all should have been wiped out.”

“Apparently one survived,” Megatron growled.

“Starscream, what’s the matter with you?” asked Knock Out.

“It wasn’t Leecher that killed my clones but a Laserblade…?” Starscream spoke to himself.


“On the Harbinger, there were some protoforms,” Starscream explained. “I used them to clone myself. Two were lost when the CRC came to help the Autobots. But the other three—” He paused to hug himself, shuddering at the memory. “S-suffice to say that they were taken apart by some sort of energy blade. One even had that symbol burned into their wing. If the Laserblade is truly their leader…”

“And she finds out that you didn’t learn your lesson…” added Knock Out.

“She will come after you again,” stated Shockwave.

“Sooner than you think,” interrupted a new voice.

Before Starscream had time to react, Leecher was next to him. Left servo closed around his neck cables, right servo on his wing.

“For Tango.” And wrenched his wing.
Starscream shrieked.

A short assassin’s blade transformed out of their right arm. “For Oscar.” And stabbed right thru his t-cog.

He screamed this time, claws digging into Leecher’s left arm, trying to get them to let go.

“And this is for X-ray and Wheeljack.” Leecher managed to lift Starscream off the floor by his throat and released an electric shock thru their servo.

Starscream seized, voicebox silent as it was the first thing to overload from the surge. It became too much and he went limp, offline.

Leecher dropped him. Every mech with a blaster had it pointed at them.

“Let this serve as a warning: Don’t mess with us,” said Leecher.

“Don’t mess with you?” asked Knock Out. “You do realize you just took down two officers. You’re not going to get away with it.”

“Isn’t that the thing though?” Leecher replied. “We just took down two of your officers, by ourselves. We have a Laserblade. When you can move as fast as she can, then you can talk about getting back at us.” And they were gone.

Leecher ran out of the medbay and down the hall, activating their emergency ground bridge protocols as they went. They hurried thru and walked into a mess on the other side. Two dust covered drills, a few crates of energon scraps, several blackened frames, and even more burnt body parts also in crates. And several dirty, tired looking bots sorting it all out.

“What the heck happened here?” Liliy asked as Leecher’s mask opened so she could see better.

“Oh, a Decepticon mine exploded, courtesy of the Autobots,” replied Leech.

The nearest mech heard them and turned to look. “Madam?”

“Hey, Victor,” Liliy called. “I’m bac--!!”

Victor slammed into them, his arms wrapping around Leecher’s chassis as they crashed to the ground. The armor shuddered when Victor tightened his hold, burying his face in their shoulder.

“Welcome back, Madam!” he cried.

“Yeah,” she laughed.

The other bots took notice too, dropping what they were doing to gather around.

“What? The Madam’s back?”

“Hey. No fair, Victor!”

“Madam! Welcome back!”

Liliy closed her optics and smiled, enjoying the relief that flooded over her. She looked up at the excited, happy faces again. “I’m home!”
X-ray limped thru the ground bridge, a cane in one servo to help steady himself, and the handle of an anti-grav cart in the other. The flat bed of the cart was loaded down with energon cubes, a gift to the Autobots from Liliy, along with the Forge of Solus Prime.

No one seemed to notice his arrival at the Autobots’ new base. All the attention in the room was on the two mechs arguing in front of him. One of them was Wheeljack. The other was a tall mech X-ray had never seen before. He had a frame similar to Optimus Prime’s old one. (Foxtrot had told him all about the Prime’s new frame since X-ray was stuck in the med bay.) He also had a similar color scheme too except his was a lighter shade of blue and there was a lot less red. There were bio-lights all over his frame and he had shoulder pads that stood well above his helm. He was looming over Wheeljack and he spoke in a stern, authoritative tone that made X-ray immediately understand why Romeo nicknamed him ‘Stiff’.

“Allow me to make myself clear,” he was saying. “As Optimus Prime’s second-in-command, I have no intention of tolerating Wrecker behavior.”

“Some things never change,” Wheeljack growled, glaring up at the taller mech.

“Jackie…” warned Bulkhead from somewhere on the other side of the room.

“Need I remind you that it was Optimus Prime himself who assigned me to command your Wreckers back on Cybertron, and get you loose cannons under control,” Ultra Magnus continued. “An effective combat unit begins with discipline. If you won’t accept that, feel free to choose the path of least resistance, as you did before.”

X-ray snapped, his energon running hot as he moved forward. No one was going to talk to his partner like that. Not in front of him.

“Have you ever considered the fact that Wheeljack can be a team player,” tone hard, he spoke up, drawing attention to himself as he approached them, “and it might just be your methods of ‘discipline’ that are actually the problem here?”

The two mechs were equally surprised by his presence. Despite the obvious appearance of being a recovering patient, with unpainted weld scars and leaning heavily on a cane, X-ray put himself between them and glared up at Ultra Magnus.

"X...?" Wheeljack hesitantly reached for him but didn't touch him, several emotions welling up at once.

X-ray ignored him in favor of continuing to berate the surprised commander. “I don’t know if you have noticed but this isn’t Cybertron. And this small band of Autobots you have been put in charge of” he waved his free servo at the other Autobots, “is not the army you commanded there either. You might want to reconsider your way of leading or you might lose them too.”

Ultra Magnus glared down at him, mouth working. Finally he asked, “Who are you?”

“X-ray, Cybertronian Rebel Corps weapons engineer. And Wheeljack’s boyfriend.”
“Boyfriend?!?” Miko shrieked.

“What the-?” Ratchet started.

“Jackie, when did this happen?” Bulkhead wanted to know.

Wheeljack ignored them all. He finally touched X-ray’s arm to get his attention. “Hey, X. Are you sure you should be moving around so much? You were just in the med bay-”

X-ray turned to him. “I have been cleared to move about for a bit as long as I don’t do anything strenuous. Besides, it’s your fault I’m here. You left and didn’t come back. You didn’t even call. I was worried.”

Looking away, Wheeljack went silent. X-ray turned to Ratchet.

“The Madam figured you guys were low on energon so she had me bring some over too.” He jerked a thumb at the cart of energon. “If you guys need anything else, you have our number. Also I’m borrowing him for a bit.” He grabbed Wheeljack’s servo and turned toward a portal that opened up behind him.

Wheeljack followed him, if only to get away from Ultra Magnus.

X-ray stopped in the receiving room and turned to Wheeljack again, letting go of his servo.

“Seriously,” he chided softly. “Do you know how worried I was when I woke up and you weren’t there? I get that you wanted to help your friends but you didn’t even call. You were told not to make me worry, weren’t you?”

Wheeljack still wasn’t looking at him. He was staring at the floor with his fists clenched at his sides.

"Oh, Wheeljack, my gallant spark. None of this was your fault."

"Starscream would not have hurt you if I hadn't said anything," Wheeljack replied quietly.

"Knowing him, he probably still would have. Besides, I also said things that made it worse too. I think he was just focusing on me because he knew it hurt you too." He put a servo on Wheeljack’s shoulder. “Wheeljack, please look at me.” He waited until the Wrecker raised his helm and looked him in the optics. "All that matters now is that we both made it out alive."

"Another positive note," interrupted a voice somewhere closer to the floor, "is that we got a little revenge for you two, as well as Tango and Oscar, before we left the Nemesis. I don't think the Screamer will be up and around for a while."

They both looked down.

“Liliy… And Miko?” Wheeljack said.

The human girl at least looked a little guilty about getting caught after following them thru the ground bridge. “Hi.”

“I’m gonna take Miko back now,” Liliy said, her hand on the girl’s shoulder to keep her from running off. “Wheeljack, if you would, make sure X-ray gets back to the med bay. He’s been on his peds for long enough for today.”

Wheeljack grinned. “Yes ma’am.”
X-ray yelped when Wheeljack suddenly scooped him up. Despite being taller, X-ray really wasn’t that much bigger than the Wrecker, so Wheeljack had no trouble carrying him. That didn’t stop X-ray from clinging tightly to him out of fright.

Wheeljack laughed. “Don’t worry, X. I wouldn’t drop a beautiful mech like you.”

X-ray ducked his helm to hide his blush as Wheeljack carried him out of the room.

“Huh. That’s a good idea.” Liliy snatched up Miko and tossed her over her shoulder. “Alfa, a bridge please.”

“Liliy! Put. Me. Down!” Miko squirmed and pounded on Liliy’s back as they disappeared into the portal. “Put me down, slagit!”

“Miko! Language!” Ratchet admonished on the other side. He turned to look. “Oh. Welcome back, Liliy. I’m glad to see you’re safe but what are you doing here?”

Liliy set Miko back on her feet. “I’m just making sure the oxygen breather gets back to the surface.”

“What do you mean by that?” Miko demanded. “I just want to see your base.”

“That’s exactly it,” Liliy replied. “Cybertronians don’t need oxygen to survive so we never bothered to make sure the base maintained a breathable atmosphere for humans. Sure, there is air movement but, uh, not enough for you to survive long, little one.”

“Well, you should fix that,” Miko huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. “I want to come visit.”

“We’ll see.”

“Liliy?” Raf appeared in the catwalks above them. He turned and called, “Hey, Jack, Liliy’s back.”

“What? She’s back?” Jack was heard before he was seen. He came up next to Raf and looked down at her. “Liliy!”

“Hey, Raf, Jack.” She waved up at them and smiled. “Long time, no see.”

The other Autobots gathered at the sounds of commotion and greeted her.

“Welcome back, Liliy,” commented Arcee.

“Glad to see that you’re ok,” added Bulkhead.

“We missed you.” Bumblebee chimed in.

“Ah, and you must be the one my ‘boys’ have nicknamed ‘Stiff’,” Liliy said, looking up and down at Ultra Magnus. “My name’s Liliy.” When he just frowned at her, she turned to the medic. “By the way, Ratchet, where’s Optimus?”

“He’s out scouting recent Decepticon activity,” replied Ratchet. “Hopefully, an energon mine. And I suppose we should thank you for the load you sent us.”

“We have more, Ratchet. All you have to do is ask.”

“I’d rather not have to rely on you.”
“The way things are looking, you may not have a choice.” Liliy looked around again. “Isn’t there someone else missing too?”

“Oh yeah. Smokescreen,” Bulkhead agreed. “He’s been gone for a while.”

“I better call him back to base,” sighed Ratchet.

“No need,” interrupted Liliy. “Here he comes.”

Sure enough, the hanger doors were open just enough to admit a fast moving blue and gold sports car. He slammed on his brakes and did a full 360 before skidding to a halt mere inches from Liliy. Miko had jumped back at his approach but Liliy didn’t move at all.

“So you’re Smokescreen,” observed Liliy.

Smokescreen transformed and looked down at her. “Ah. What gave me away?”

Liliy tapped her chest. “Your spark signal. By the way, my name’s Liliy.”

“Oh! So you’re the Madam,” he said, going down on one knee to see her better. “I didn’t know you were human.”

“Just as human as you are a fancy sports car.”

“Point taken. Wait. You think my alt is fancy?”

“Where have you been, soldier?” demanded Ultra Magnus as he stepped closer.

Smokescreen stood up. “Scanning new war paint. Thought it’d be proactive to follow Optimus’ lead. And Bumblebee’s.”

“Now you can look your best while stacking those empty cubes,” Ultra Magnus ordered, glancing over at the pile in the corner.

“Yeah. Definitely a stiff,” commented Liliy.

“Perhaps you are not aware that I am Optimus Prime’s second in command,” replied Ultra Magnus, glaring down at her.

Liliy smiled, a cold smile. “Oh, I am very aware, commander. And let me introduce myself again. I am Madam Liliy, the Lady Scythe, Leader of the Cybertronian Rebel Corps, your ally in this fight, and friend of Optimus Prime. If you want my respect, you are going to have to earn it, mister. You might start by fixing that attitude of yours.”

“Cybertronian Rebel Corps? No wonder the members I’ve met so far were so disrespectful, with you as their leader,” he shot back.

“Hmh.” Liliy crossed her arms. “Respect should be mutual. I know that, despite the things he says, Ratchet respects me in his own way and I respect him as a medic and a friend. Even if he can be an idiot sometimes.”

Ratchet just humphed but didn’t deny what she said.

“I suspect that is why Wheeljack has such a problem with you,” she continued. “You don’t respect him.”
“He is just a soldier,” Ultra Magnus replied. “All he needs to do is follow orders.”

“Ouch.” Liliy grimaced. “If that’s how you think, then I can see exactly why he hates you. That sort of attitude won’t fly here on Earth. You might want to change that or you won’t last long as commander.”

His optic ridges drew even closer together. “Was that a threat?”

Liliy smirked. “Hardly. When I threaten, I like to get up in your face and do it.”

“Ratchet, Optimus is requesting a ground bridge,” Raf suddenly interrupted.

“Thank you, Raf. I’ll get it.” Ratchet set aside the tech he was working and moved to the ground bridge controls.

Optimus emerged from the portal. Liliy flinched slightly. She had seen Prime’s new frame in Leech’s memories but seeing it in person was different. Personally, she liked his old frame better.

“Optimus, did you find energon?” inquired Ratchet.

“No. But I did uncover this.” He set the large skull he was carrying down on Ratchet’s makeshift workbench.

“It cannot be,” breathed Ratchet.

“Be what?” Jack wanted to know.

Liliy zipped up to where Optimus set down the skull. “The ancient remains of a predacon. Well, ancient compared to humans, anyway. They aren’t that old compared to our lifespans.”

“Liliy!” Optimus started. Then he smiled. “It’s good to see you safe.”

She smiled back. “I’m glad to see you are still with us too.”

“You and I need to talk later.”

“Yes. It seems we do.”

“Um, Liliy,” interrupted Smokescreen, “you just said that these remains are not that old compared to us. What do you mean? Cause, I mean, predacons went extinct before... most life began on Cybertron, right?”

“I did mention it before but I guess you weren’t here yet, were you. There were still predacons on this planet when I arrived,” Liliy explain. “I even killed one. Lopped its helm right off.” She made a slicing motion at her neck. “What a terrible mess that was. Anyway, it’s obvious predacons aren’t native to this planet. AND. If they went extinct on Cybertron, what are they doing here? The answer is Shockwave.”

“Shockwave?”

“Yes. I also mentioned that previously as well. That I had heard that Shockwave was working on cloning early in the war.” She gestured to the skull. “This is most likely one of his creations. And speaking of, what happened to the current predacon?”

“Oh. Don’t worry. We put him on ice,” Miko explained.
“I see…” Liliy paused, pulling down her visor. “Ah. There he is.”

“Huh?”

She pushed her visor. “I used the SDS and checked the poles. He’s still alive.”

“Figures,” said Ratchet. “The temperatures were only cold enough to put him in stasis. Hopefully he stays that way.”

“But this doesn’t look good for us,” Arcee spoke up. “That predacon was trouble enough and if Shockwave is looking to clone another one, or more than one…”

“We could have Beast wars on our servos,” Bulkhead added.

“And if Shockwave only needs a single strand of CNA to clone a beast…” Ratchet started.

“…He already possess what he needs to engender this one.” Optimus finished. “Autobots, we must become beast hunters.” He looked down at Liliy. “I hope that we can have your help with this, Liliy.”

“The only thing I can promise is supplies,” Liliy replied. “And maybe an occasional rescue if someone decides to try and get themselves killed.”

“That is better than nothing. I very much appreciate any help you can give us.”

“I already sent over a load of energon. Ratchet just needs to tell me if I can bring anything else.”

Optimus and Liliy both looked at Ratchet.

He waved them off. “Yes. Yes. I understand.”

“Anyway, O.P., you said we needed to talk. I suppose you meant privately?” Liliy asked.

“Preferably. Would you mind going for a drive?”

“Normally, no. But I guess it would be ok this time.” She waved her left hand.

“I see,” Optimus replied, understanding. He transformed down to his alt.

“Yeah.” Liliy jumped down to the floor. “I still like your old frame better.” She climbed into his cab and buckled in.

Optimus left the hanger. It wasn’t until after they left the base and had been on the road for a bit that Optimus finally spoke.

“Leecher told me about Cybertron.”

“Indeed. You seemed immensely relieved to hear the news.”

“I thought I had doomed our planet. Our race. I-I had no idea what to do.”

“And you think dying and leaving it all to an inexperienced rookie was the way to go?”

“I thought that the Forge was the only way to revive the planet. The only hope for Cybertron. What was I supposed to think? Or do? The others were not there. And even if they had been they may have made the same choice as Smokescreen.”
“Maybe. But maybe not. Guess we’ll never know.”

“Have there been any changes on Cybertron yet?”

“None so far. Charlie reports everything is normal.”

“Maybe it was not enough energy. Perhaps there is a way to give it more.”

“I’ll send Bravo over to the Lock site. Maybe he can find a way to rebuild it or something… By the way, if we are having this conversation in private, then you haven’t told the others yet, have you?”

“No one knows but Smokescreen. And I told him not to tell anyone either.”

“Better not to get their hopes up just yet?”

“Yes. They have had so much disappointment already. I want to wait until we have a more definite result before telling them.”

“And shouldering all the responsibility yourself. Per usual.”

Optimus was silent.

“Don’t worry, O.P.. We won’t let you do it alone this time. Leech and I have a hand in this now too.”

“Thank you… Can I ask, why did you start calling me O.P.?”

“Because those are your initials no matter who you are. This way I don’t have to differentiate.’ is what I told Orion Pax when he asked me the same thing. It was so I wouldn’t accidentally call him Optimus. I was trying to make him think I was an ignorant human. Obviously, that line totally gave me away but I managed to distract him from realizing that until much later.”

“...This is the first time you have actually spoken about anything that happened on the Nemesis.”

Suddenly, Liliy hid her face in her hands. “That’s because some of it is fragging embarrassing.”

Her holo-layer flickered. Her left hand withdrew from her face to reveal a yellow-brown eye and black hair and slightly more masculine features.

“Yeah.” The voice was Leech’s. “She’s super embarrassed by it because she had to act like an actual fleshling. Pretending to be scared of you and admitting that she was scared of Meg--” The right hand suddenly clamped over his mouth, cutting him off.

There was a bit of silence as her holo-layer flicked back and forth for a bit before it settled back on Liliy’s appearance.

“Please ignore him, Optimus.”

Prime’s engine rumbled in amusement. “Let’s return to the base for now.” And commed for a ground bridge.

Wheeljack stayed with X-ray until he fell into recharge. He planted a gentle kiss on the mech’s forehelm before he quietly left the room. Foxtrot looked up when he entered the med bay.
“He’s in recharge now. I probably need to go back to the Autobot base,” he said as he crossed the bay. “I’ll come check on him later, I promise.”

“You better keep your promise this time, mech. Otherwise…” He finished off with a shrug while pointing a laser scalpel in Wheeljack’s direction.

Wheeljack glanced at the door hiding X-ray and smirked. “I understand.”

“Welcome back, Wheeljack. How’s X-ray?” Liliy asked as soon as the Wrecker arrived.

“Recharging.”

“And you’re not going to make him worry this time, right?”

“Don’t worry. Foxtrot already threatened me with a laser scalpel.”

“He’s pretty handy with that laser scalpel too. You better take him seriously.”

“Yeah. Especially considering he was probably trained how to use it by you.”

Liliy just grinned.

On the other side of the room, Optimus approached Ratchet. The medic was working quietly at a small console, staring intently at the monitor.

“Synthetic energon?” Prime inquired, looking over Ratchet’s shoulder.

“Indeed,” Ratchet replied. He turned to Optimus. “I am concerned that without access to any energon reserves since our base was destroyed, our ability to deal with impending crises will be severely hampered.”

“What about the energon from Liliy?”

“It will only go so far. And, despite her offer, I would rather not have to rely on her. Who knows how big her reserves are. After all, she has more bots to fuel.”

“That is true.”

“Just, please, manage your expectations. I am working with even more rudimentary hardware than before.”

Agent Fowler emerged from his office and called for Optimus’ attention. “Prime! Satellite surveillance has picked up two signs of Decepticon activity. One near an oil field outside of El Paso. The other near the Hebrides Bluffs in Scotland. Don’t forget to pack your kilts.”

Liliy snickered at that.

“We must divide our resources,” Optimus said. "Ultra Magnus...” He turned to the commander and noticed that Wheeljack had returned. “Lead the Wreckers to the Bluffs.”

Ultra Magnus was slightly surprised by the order until he looked over and also saw that Wheeljack had returned. “Yes, Optimus.” He stepped closer to Optimus and lowered his voice a little. “Uh,
what’s a kilt?”

Liliy’s snickers broke into full blown laughter. Optimus and Magnus turned to look at her.

“I’m sorry,” she wheezed, holding her sides. “It’s just… Hahaha. Oh man. Haa.” She calmed down a little. “I just love it when the new guys come around. It’s not really that important for your mission, Stiff. But if you're that worried about it, the humans have an information network called the World Wide Web. You can look it up later.”

Optimus noticed how Magnus’ optics narrowed and his servos clenched into fists as he glared at the little femme who was receiving a high five from Wheeljack.

“Liliy.” Optimus waited until he had her attention. “Ultra Magnus is my second in command.”

“Yeah. But he’s also too stiff for the dynamic of your team, Optimus. Until he can loosen up…” She just shrugged.

“We’ll talk about this later.”

“It won’t change anything but ok.”

“Bulkhead, Wheeljack. Let’s roll,” Magnus ordered.

Wheeljack let out a disgruntled sigh. Liliy smiled at him sympathetically.

Ultra Magnus stopped next to the Forge of Solus Prime that was propped up against the wall. He turned to the Prime.

“Optimus, I know there are many emotions tied to the Forge.”

“This is no time to stand on ceremony.”

Ultra Magnus grabbed the handle and had to use both servos to lift the hammer. “Then I would be honored to put this to some practical use.”

As the Scotland team was leaving, Liliy was the only one who noticed Miko going after them. The girl outright asked Wheeljack if she could go with him this time.

“Sure, why not,” Wheeljack replied, reaching down and picking her up.

As he straightened, he glanced up and saw Liliy watching them. She rolled her eyes and waved them off. Wheeljack grinned and left the hanger. Liliy just let them go because she knew that Wheeljack and Bulkhead together would be enough to protect Miko but the other reason she let them go was because she knew that the girl’s presence would annoy Ultra Magnus.

Out of curiosity, Liliy checked with the SDS on her phone to see who was at the two locations. There were just vehicons at the one in Scotland. And, while Liliy would have liked to have requested that the Autobots continue to try to hold back, seeing as how they couldn’t even do that for Ucon, she wasn’t going to bother. She also figured that the newest addition, the Stiff that he was, would object.

Checking the other location in Texas, Liliy quickly turned to call after Optimus before he left with Bumblebee and Smokescreen.
“Hey, O.P.! You guys be careful out there. It seems that Shockwave himself is at that location.”

“Thank you for the warning, Lily.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll be fine!” added Smokescreen.

“Yeah…” she mumbled as they disappeared.

Lily wandered over to the humans’ living area and saw that the boys had slept thru the whole ordeal. She took a seat on the couch next to Raf, careful not to wake him and glanced around the hanger. Arcee was running comms so Ratchet could focus on the Synth’N formula.

[Why not just give him the complete formula?] Leech’s voice intruded on her processor.

[[I will,]] she thought back. [[Eventually.]] She pulled down her visor she could track both locations at once. She frowned when at least half the vehicon sparks were extinguished in Scotland. [[I’m wondering if it’s a good idea to even keep helping them at all.]]

[You already promised.]

[...Yeah.]]

After the Wreckers secured the Cons’ dig site and Magnus found out that Wheeljack brought Miko along, which he was furious about, they entered the cave to find the predacon bone. While Ultra Magnus forged ahead, Bulkhead began to question his friend.

“So Jackie, what’s this about you having a boyfriend? How long has that been going on?”

“Yeah,” Miko added. “Why didn’t you tell us? I thought we were best buds.”

“Well, Bulk, you remember X from that incident with Dreadwing?”

“Yes. The two of you seemed to get along pretty well.”

“I jokingly mentioned dating after I got dragged back to their base to get away from Soundwave a while ago. He was just concerned about me but he got really flustered and ran off. When I went to find him, he asked for a sparring match--an actual sparring match, Bulkhead! With our fists! Stop looking at me like that!”

“Did you kick his tailpipes?” Miko asked, oblivious of what Bulkhead’s expression implied.

“Nah. He kicked mine,” sounding more proud than about it than he normally would have. “But he also said yes when I asked him out for real. I mean, there was a… condition…” Trailing off, he glanced back toward the cave entrance. He had forgotten about that until now. Even if he hadn’t actually promised X-ray that he would hold back, he still felt a little guilty. “...scrap.”

“What’s wrong?” asked Bulkhead.

“It’s nothing-” Wheeljack started.

“Enough idle chatter!” Ultra Magnus called back to them since they had stopped. “Let’s get moving, soldiers!”

“Ugh!” Wheeljack groaned. “Ya know, you did the smart thing, Bulk. Leaving the Wreckers when
you did. When we were still bringing our A-game. Before the rust set in.” And trudged after Magnus.

“Wait! I thought Wheeljack was the one who left the Wreckers?” Miko asked, confused.

“Jackie basically deserted once the Wreckers fell under Ultra Magnus’ command. I transferred out before that. To join up with Optimus in the Battle of Thunderhead Pass. Sometimes I think Jackie feels like I deserted him.”

“You don’t want to be the one who breaks up the band, Bulk.”

The ground suddenly shook, knocking Miko off the boulder she was perched on. Bulkhead caught her before she hit the ground and protected her from the rocks and dust coming off the ceiling.

“What was that?” Bulkhead wondered.

A roar came from the cave entrance. And the ground shook with every footfall.

“Whatever it is, it’s big,” observed Wheeljack. The sounds were coming closer very quickly. “And it’s coming fast.”

The next moment the predacon came barreling around the bend, screaming as it caught sight of them.

“The predacon…” said Magnus. He turned. “Let’s roll!”

They all transformed and sped deeper into the cave.

“Frag!” Liliy swore under her breath when the predacon’s signal showed up in Scotland.

Miko would have been fine if it was just the vehicons. But now that the predacon was there, she was concerned for the Bots safety as well. According to Hirry, it was a large dragon type, heavily armored and very persistent. Meaning, the only person in the CRC capable of taking it down was Liliy herself. Sighing, she got up from the couch and commed Alfa for a ground bridge.

“Having fun yet, Miko?” Liliy asked as she leaned over the edge and offered a hand to the girl climbing up the cave wall.

“Liliy! How did you know I was here?” Miko grabbed her hand.

Liliy easily pulled the girl up to the surface. “I saw you leave with Wheeljack. And he knows that I saw so it’s fine. What are the Bots doing?”

“I think they’re gonna fight the predacon. Ultra Magnus told me to go to his ship and call Optimus.”

“Well, that might be kind of hard to do,” Liliy said as they headed for the ship.

“Why?”

“Because someone got out of the med bay far quicker than anticipated.”
The ship’s hatch-lift started to lower. Liliy grabbed Miko and pulled her behind a boulder to hide.

“Given that this is currently unoccupied,” they heard Starscream saying, “it would seem the Autobots did stumble upon our little mining operation.”

Liliy peeked around the rock as the flyer stepped off the lift and saw that he was wearing the Apex Armor. “That explains a few things,” she muttered.

“Not to worry,” he continued to boast. “My predacon is no doubt dismantling the interlopers as we speak. It was a challenge, but I managed to tame the savage beast. Taught it to heed my every command.”

Liliy make the ‘yak yak yak’ motion with her hand and Miko had to cover her mouth to stifle her giggles.

“You’re not wearing the armor to protect yourself from it?” asked one of the two silver eradicons that were accompanying him.

Starscream turned to them. “From my beloved pet? Of course not. In fact, it’s getting rather warm in here.” He touched the circle in the center of the chest plate and the armor started to fold up and disappear until only the chest plate remained. He set the armor on a nearby boulder. “Aw, ventilation.”

“Ho?” Upon seeing that, Liliy got an idea. “Miko, do you want to have some real fun?” she whispered.

“Huh? Like what?” the girl asked in a hushed tone, but there was definite excitement.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Liliy gestured vaguely. “Maybe beating the scrap out of Starscream?”

“You mean with that armor?” Miko peeked around the rock. Starscream had his back turned.

“Indeed. It doesn’t belong to him anyway.”

Miko looked up at her. “Do you think I can really use it?”

“I don’t see why not.”

Suddenly, an explosion in the cave shook the ground and smoke and dust billowed from the hole that Miko climbed out of. Miko and Liliy circled around the boulder they were hiding behind when the Cons went to investigate.

“Let’s go.”

They ran for the ship. Out of nowhere, Starscream’s ped slammed down in front of them. Stopping, they turned to look up at him.

“Well, well. Miko, isn’t it?” Starscream purred. “And who might you be?”

Liliy grabbed Miko and lifted her, her arm under her legs and other hand keeping her head down. She smiled her best unsettling smile and replied: “Your worst nightmare.” Before zipping up to the top of the boulder where the Apex Armor still sat. She set Miko down on the center circle and stepped back as the armor activated.

The look on Starscream’s face when he realized what was happening was totally worth it. When the armor fully transformed, it stood about Arcee’s height and Miko looked tiny under the glass
“Ho yeah!” Miko exclaimed. “What’s a matter, Screamy? Can’t pick on someone your own size?” She stepped toward the Con and he took a step back.

“Oh, he can,” Liliy sneered. “He just prefers to stab them in the back.”

Starscream glared at her. “You-”

He was interrupted by an animalistic growl. They all looked up. The predacon bone fell from the sky and bounced off the Apex Armor before rolling to a stop on the ground.

“What do ya know, it does fetch,” Starscream commented.

Miko looked up again as the predacon descended and landed heavily on top of the ship.

“Scrap!” Miko exclaimed softly before promptly turning and running away, screaming.

“Miko!” Liliy called after her but predacon leapt and smashed the girl to the ground. Liliy just sighed and sat down to wait. She knew the Apex Armor was almost impenetrable, her blade being one of the few things that could pierce it. She also knew that Miko wasn’t really being hurt despite all her screaming. Hearing Starscream chuckle maniacally, she looked up to see him stepping closer to her.

“Unless you want the whole of the CRC raining down on you, I suggest you stay away from me, you pompous, preening waste of metal.”

“Wha-?! How dare you-” He was interrupted by his comm.

{Starscream! Status report!} Megatron demanded.

“Watch her!” Starscream mouthed at the eradicons, jabbing a digit at Liliy before he answered his leader.

“Hmh.” Liliy leaned back on her hands and looked up at the eradicons. “So which squad are you two from?”

They looked at each other and the one who had questioned Starscream spoke, “We’re from squad AD.”

“From the Elite squads, huh? Should have figured that since you were silver. Do you guys have any other names or are you too good for that sort of thing?”

The eradicon who had spoken huffed and crossed his arms over his chassis. “That stuff is stupid.”

The other eradicon shyly shuffled their ped on the ground. “I kind of like the name Adde.”

“Oh!” Liliy smiled up at them. “That’s a good name.”

They all looked up when Starscream gasped. The predacon suddenly pounced on him, pinning him to the ground with one massive claw. The beast screamed in the flyer’s face before grabbing the dropped bone in its mouth and flying away.

Liliy looked over at Miko. She was just lying in the middle of a scorched circle of earth, not moving.
[Is she ok?] Leech asked.

[[Yeah. I can read her vitals from here.]]

Now that the predacon was gone, Starscream went over to Miko to get the armor. He tutted thrice, tapping his heel on the ground.

“Even the strongest armor can’t protect the weakest of creatures,” he said, kneeling beside her.

As he reached for the armor, Miko suddenly reached up and grabbed his shoulders.

“It protected you, didn’t it?” she shot back.

“Oh hoho! BURN!” Liliy yelled as Miko shoved Starscream away.

Miko got to her feet and grabbed Starscream’s arm and started spinning him around.

“You guys should probably go help him,” Liliy suggested to the eradicons.

[It won’t help.]

[[Nah. But it gives Miko more people to fight. Screamer isn’t much of a challenge when it comes to hand-to-hand.]]

The eradicons ran forward as Miko released Starscream. The seeker crashed into poor Adde, throwing them both back several feet. The other eradicon brought out his blaster and started shooting Miko. She guarded at first but then realized that the blasts were harmless so she ran forward and plowed into the Con, throwing him over her head. Starscream had recovered and he was angry. He fired one of his rockets at Miko. She simply caught it and let it explode in her face.

“Oh, this is too good,” Liliy commented as Miko leapt from the cloud of smoke and slammed into Starscream feet first. He was down.

[The boys would love to see this.]

Miko was trading blows with the two eradicons now. She was climbing on top of them and throwing them around. She punched and kicked and pushed them back.

“Who’s wrecking who now?” she jeered before she laid out Adde.

“Go, Miko! Woot, woot!” Liliy cheered.

Another flying kick sent the other eradicon sprawling too. Starscream, on the other hand, was finally getting back to his peds.

“You do know that I vanquished Cliffjumper, don’t you?” he snarled, flexing his claws.

“You mean you mercilessly stabbed an Autobot prisoner while he was helpless and injured,” Liliy corrected.

He glared at her again. “How do you know what happened?”

Liliy shrugged. “ZZ-05 was there. He told me what happened.”

“That scraplet! Next time I see him, I’ll-” Flinching under Liliy’s ominous stare, Starscream cut himself off.
Liliy was standing now. “You’ll what?”

Starscream hesitated, taking a small step back. Such a small being, and a human at that, made him feel so uneasy. It was not dissimilar to the feeling he got when standing near Megatron and watching the warlord’s temper begin to boil. “Um-”

Luckily for him, the Autobots interrupted.

“Miko!” Bulkhead called as he and the others ran over.

Starscream saw the Autobots bearing down on them and ordered a retreat before transforming and flying off. The two eradicons followed suit.

“They got away with the bone,” Miko told Bulkhead when he came up to her.

“Hey.” Wheeljack called Miko’s attention to him. “You brought your A-game, kid. Like a true Wrecker.” He bumped her shoulder with his fist. Miko smiled up at him. He looked up at Bulkhead. “And I wanna remember us just like this.” He turned a glare up at Ultra Magnus. “Before the rust sets in.” And walked away.

“What?” Miko asked as Wheeljack folded down to his wheels and started driving away. “Where’s Wheeljack going?”

“Solo,” Bulkhead said.

“Again?!”

“Jackie just broke up the band.”

They looked up at the sudden squeal of brakes. Liliy was standing in Wheeljack’s path. They were too far away to hear what was said but Wheeljack opened his driver door for a moment before closing it again when a ground bridge appeared.

“He’s coming with me for a while so don’t worry,” Liliy shouted at them as Wheeljack disappeared. “See you guys later.” And she disappeared into the portal too.

When X-ray woke up, he found Wheeljack sitting on a stool next to his berth, staring at the wall. He checked his chronometer and it had been several hours since he went into recharge.

“Short Stuff? Have you been there the whole time?”

Wheeljack jerked, startled from his musings. “Ah, no. I just got back actually,” he said, tone soft. He didn’t really look at X-ray.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing. I’m fine.”

“Hm…” X-ray reached over and cupped Wheeljack’s cheek, turning his helm so he could properly meet the Wrecker’s optics. “Unfortunately, we have been together long enough that I can tell that you’re not fine and it is something. What happened after you went back? Was it that commander again?”

“No… I mean, yeah, he was an annoying crankshaft, but, no, that’s not it.” He didn’t turn away
this time, but he did look down.

X-ray hooked his digits under Wheeljack’s helm fin and ran them along the backside of it. “Then, what was it?”

Leaning his helm into X-ray’s touch, Wheeljack sighed. “It’s Bulkhead.”

“Your Wrecker friend?”

“Yeah. It just burns me up when a Wrecker goes soft. You should have seen him trying to kiss up to Magnus to keep him from losing his cool whenever I did something the commander didn’t like. Bulk’s spent too much time around Optimus.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” X-ray was still rubbing the back of Wheeljack’s fin and he began to wonder if this was what it was like to scratch a human’s domesticated animal behind the ears because the mech seemed to be rather content despite talking about an unpleasant subject.

“Not really, I guess.” Wheeljack draped his arm over X-ray’s chassis and laid his helm on his armor. “But I miss the old Bulkhead.”

“Look on the bright side, at least he’s still alive. And he still wants to be your friend, right?”

“Yeah…” And closed his optics.

X-ray stopped his ministrations and took his servo away. Wheeljack opened his optics again in disappointment.

“Look, Wheeljack, you’ll always have the Wreckers as you knew them. In here.” He poked Wheeljack gently in the chest plates, right over his spark. “But times change, players come and go, and, if you can’t adapt, you’ll rust.” He cupped his cheek again. “Don’t push Bulkhead away. If something happened to him, you’d never forgive yourself. Trust me, I know.”

“You lost friends too, huh?”

X-ray’s servo fell to the berth. “Yeah…”

They lapsed into silence. Wheeljack watched at X-ray while the other mech stared at the ceiling, remembering times past.

“You’re beautiful,” Wheeljack stated.

X-ray looked down at him. “You’re not too terrible yourself.”

“Ouch.” Wheeljack pushed up so he was leaning over X-ray by bracing himself on the berth, his servo under X-ray’s arm. “So you think there are mechs out there more handsome than me?”

“Oh, I’m sure there are.” X-ray smiled cheekily up at him. “I just don’t care about them because I have you.”

“Is that so?” Wheeljack leaned down and kissed him.

“Hm.” Another kiss. “Yes.”

Suddenly, the door slid open. They quickly pulled apart to find Oscar standing in the doorway with two cubes of energon in his servos.
“I brought your ration, X-ray,” Oscar said, not caring that he had just interrupted them as he stepped into the room. He handed a cube to the mech who had slowly sat on the berth. Then he offered the other to the Wrecker. “And one for you as well, Wheeljack.”

Wheeljack took the cube. “Uh, thanks.”

Oscar turned to leave. He paused in the doorway again to glance back at the Wrecker. “By the way, keep the canoodling to a minimum. If you break him, you’re gonna end up on the med berth in the next room.”

“Oscar!” X-ray cried. But the door was already shut.

Wheeljack smiled. “Your friends really care about you.”

“Of course. They’re my family after all.”

“Family, huh?” Wheeljack considered as he took a sip of his energon.

“Yeah.” X-ray sipped his energon. “You should go talk to Bulkhead. The sooner you clear this up, the better you’ll feel.”

“Sure.” Wheeljack sat back down and smirked at X-ray. “Just after I finish this cube.”

Liliy’s phone rang. She checked the caller id before answering. “What’s up?”

{Hey, Liliy. Can I ask a favor?} Jack’s voice answered.

“Yes, Jack. What is it?”

{Agent Fowler and my mom went to pick up a predacon bone from a museum. Fowler said it would be a milk run but I have a bad feeling about it. Could you have someone go keep an eye on them just in case the Cons show up?}

“Hm? Is it really because the Cons might show or is it because you don’t trust Agent Fowler with your mom?”

There was a long moment of silence on the other end of the line. {...both?}

Liliy chuckled. “Alright, Jack. Send me the coordinates and I’ll send someone over.”

{Thanks a lot, Liliy.}

Hirry was already moving when Knock Out stopped in front of the humans.

“I have a bone to pick with both of you,” Knock Out quipped, charging up the blaster that popped out of his fender.

Hirry transformed and leapt, grabbing the humans as she flipped over them. Folding back up around them, she landed on her tires.

“Catch me if you can, Doc,” she challenged, peeling out of the parking lot.
Knock Out yelled “Wha-!?” before going after her with a growl.

“Who are you?” Fowler asked from her passenger seat, still clutching the crate with the predacon bone.

“I’m Hirry. Liliy sent me to watch over you,” she replied, weaving her way in and out of traffic. “Something about a favor for one of the children.”

“It must have been Jack,” said June, sitting in the driver seat. She was holding onto the door for dear life as Hirry raced along. “He was worried about me.”

“Can’t you just bridge us out of here?” asked Fowler. He had one hand braced on the dash now.

“In the middle of the city?” Hirry shot back, narrowly missing another vehicle as she weaved back out of oncoming traffic. There were horns blaring in her wake. “What would you prefer to cover up? A car chase or an alien abduction on the side of a busy highway?”

Fowler grimaced. “You... have a point.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll call for backup once we are closer to the outskirts.”

Suddenly, a big, blue SUV slammed into the side of the Hummer.

“Guh! Breakdown. I guess I’m calling now.” She switched to the comms. “Tango, your crush and his partner are on my six. Could you do something about them please?”

{With pleasure.} the mech replied.

“Thank you. I’m almost to the open road. Hurry up.” And dropped the comm.

“Crush?” Fowler asked.

“Yeah. Tango has a crush on a Con. Ya got a problem with that, fleshy?”

“No… It’s just weird to hear it. Same with hearing Wheeljack had a boyfriend.”

“Well, technically, the two mechs chasing us are bonded. The Cybertronian equivalent of being married.”

Fowler made a face.

“What?”

“It’s just weird. Two guys...”

“Ah. That’s what you mean.” She had stopped weaving about as much now. Traffic was clearing up the farther they went. “Well, the way you humans classify sex and gender and what not does not really apply to us. Yes, we do have mech and femme frames but those can easily be modified. You can’t even tell the difference between the mech and femme vehicons, you know. Also, humans might require the different sexes for reproduction, but love isn’t always about reproducing. The Madam-”

Her comm crackled, interrupting her. {Hirry, your tail is clear. Go ahead and bridge.}

“Thanks, Tango.” She switched channels. “Alfa, I need a bridge to the Autobot base.”
Knock Out could keep up with Hirry, sure. He was pretty certain she was the femme who had punched him in the face after Romeo took the relic from him. But he had no idea how to stop her now.

So, he called in Breakdown.

The bruiser had come around the corner and slammed into the side of the yellow vehicle that was almost the same size as him. She swerved a bit but kept up her pace. And then, even with Breakdown’s help, she stayed just out of their reach.

Finally, they were out of the city and there was no more traffic. Knock Out brought out his blasters. Just as he was firing, a familiar orange car slammed into his side, driving him into the side of Breakdown. Startled, Breakdown slammed on his brakes and ended up dragging Knock Out with him because the sports car Con’s blaster got stuck on his running board.

Making sure the two had stopped, Tango commed Hirry that she was clear to bridge as he also pulled over. After she was gone, he transformed and walked back to the Cons, not bothered by the fact that his passenger door was sporting a blaster mark this time.

“Really, I thought the two of you would have known better by now,” he said, putting his servos on his hips.

“Tango!” the two chorused together.

“What’s the matter? Are you two stuck or something?”

“Actually…” Breakdown hedged.

Tango came around the back of Knock Out and saw the predicament. “Oh dear.” He covered his mouth with his servo to hide his smile. “It seems you are.”

“Well, don’t just stand there laughing,” Knock Out demanded. “Help us out.”

“Yes. Yes.” He was still chuckling. “Don’t get your gears in a twist.”

Tango got them unstuck and they finally transformed.

“Tango, are you ok?” Breakdown inquired. “What did Starscream do to you?”

“Yeah.” Knock Out agreed. “And, just so you know, I did my best to make him as uncomfortable as possible while I patched him up after your commander’s attack.”

Tango stared at Knock Out. “Wow. I didn’t think you had it in you to be genuinely sweet on anyone but Breakdown.” He was covering his mouth again. “I’m kind of embarrassed.”

“Well- It was- I-” Knock Out sputtered. “...You’re welcome?”


Breakdown smiled. “You’re welcome.”

“So what are you doing here,” Knock Out demanded after gathering his wits enough to change the
subject, “besides scaring the slag out of me?”

Tango shrugged. “That’s all. Hirry called me specifically for backup because you,” he poked Knock Out in the chest plates, “were chasing her.”

“Thanks to you the humans got away with the bone. What am I supposed to tell Megatron?” Knock Out grumbled, crossing his arms.

“I don’t know. The truth?” Tango gestured vaguely.

“Do you know how much trouble I’m going to be in?” Knock Out shot back.

Tango grinned. “If you wanted the bone that badly, you should have got there first.”

Knock Out raised his fist with a growl. “I ought to knock you upside the helm.”

“Ha! You have to catch me first!” Tango snapped down to his wheels and sped away from them.

“Get back here, you slaggard!” Knock Out yelled, transforming to go after him.

Breakdown shook his helm and sighed. What was he going to do with these two, he thought as he also transformed and went after them.

Chapter End Notes

Just a few more chapters to go before the end.
He was happy. Megatron had allowed him to go out by himself this time. It was mostly because Starscream was stuck in the med bay again. Something about aggravating recent injuries and apparently gaining new ones. He was slightly curious about what happened to them after he left with the bone but at the same time he didn’t care. Right now, he was free.

With a heavy flap of his wings he put on another burst of speed, the wind whistling over his armor. He was nearing the coordinates where the vehicons were supposed to be. He fell into a dive, letting gravity bring him down. He was almost to the top of the trees when he spread his wings to catch the air and slow himself. Beating the air with his wings to stay above the trees, he surveyed the area.

There were indeed mechs there. And they were wearing the right masks, but they looked nothing like vehicons. There were signs of a fight, but he saw no signs of the Decepticon troops that were supposed to be there.

Curiosity got the better of him. He wanted to know who these mechs were. Finding an open spot among the trees, he dropped to the ground. He landed a little heavier than he wanted to and froze. He stood there, listening and watching, waiting to see if he had alerted the strangers. It seemed that he had not. Good. He slunk forward, through the trees, until he was close enough to leap out and catch one of the mechs.

His target had his back to him. A red and white, boxy mech. Someone shouted a warning as he pounced and his target turned. The mech was slammed to the ground on his back, his armor creaking slightly under the weight that impacted with his chassis.

There was the noise of several transformations and whining of blasters charging up as the rest of the mechs surrounded him.

“Hold your fire!” commanded a black mech, the only one whose frame still slightly resembled a vehicon.

Growling, he assessed the situation. He had one of the mechs pinned to the ground under his claw. The rest of them, numbering seven, had him surrounded, their blasters pointed at him. They wore vehicon masks but they were definitely strangers to him. None of them wore a Decepticon insignia. They were uncertain of what to do, he could tell. He had their comrade in his clutches so they were hesitant to fire and provoke him.

“Hey!”

He turned toward the voice. It was a little femme, who measured barely seven feet tall, with armor of platinum, gray, and red. She stood on a small boulder in front of him. Well, it was small to him but it was taller than her. He wondered where she had come from. He hadn’t seen her earlier.
“Let him go!” she demanded.

He stared at the femme. Unlike the rest of the mechs, she did not seem to be afraid of him. He could smell the fear on the others and the mech under him was quaking. Said mech barely suppressed a whimper when he tightened his claw around his chassis.

“Let him go,” she repeated, a weapon of sorts transforming around her only servo, the red crescent blade humming with energy.

Was that supposed to be a threat? Did this tiny femme really think she could actually damage him with her tiny blade more than the larger mechs and their blasters? He lowered his helm and screamed at her. She didn’t move but the rest of the mechs tensed up.

“Remove your claw from his chassis.” Her voice was calmer and quieter than before and it put him a little on edge. “Or I will remove it for you.”

The blade around her servo shaped into a point that extended rapidly downwards until it pierced the boulder. A flicker of red light caught his optic at the base of the boulder and he realized that the blade went all the way thru the rock and into the ground. The blade remained for a few seconds before it returned to the crescent shape.

Dangerous! The femme was not afraid of him because she was dangerous and she knew she could actually hurt him. He finally understood that. Slowly, ever so slowly, he relaxed his grip and took a step back. The mech wasted no time scrambling away from him and over to his companions. The femme actually dared to look away from him to watch the mech retreat, her blade disappearing back into her arm. Was she letting her guard down even though she was still so close to him? She may be dangerous but so was he. He would make her regret that. It wouldn’t be too hard. She was so small he could finish her off with a single bite of his powerful jaws.

He froze when she turned back to focus on him again. She was smiling. But it was unlike anything he had ever seen before. When Megatron or Starscream smiled, it made his plating crawl. Knock Out was just smug. Breakdown never smiled around him. Neither Shockwave nor Soundwave had a mouth to smile with. At least that he could see. And the vehicons always avoided him when they were off-duty. But this femme’s smile was different. It was bright.

“Thank you for letting him go,” she said, sincerely. “I really didn’t want to have to hurt you.”

He snarled at her. She chuckled.

“Yes, yes. I know, you don’t trust me.”

He drew back. What?

She was peering up at him now, her helm tilted with curiosity.

“I wonder…” she muttered.

Then she was gone. He swung his helm back and forth looking for her. Where did she go?

“Well, look-y there. You do have one.”

He twisted. She was underneath him, staring up at his midsection. But before he could move, she was gone again.

“Here I am.”
He whipped his helm back around. She was standing on the boulder again. Not only was she capable of causing him damage, but she could move faster than he could comprehend. A lethal combination. One that he did not want to mess with. He growled at her as he took a step back.

“You have a t-cog,” she said, completely undeterred by his warning.

He stopped and tilted his helm, mirroring her earlier curiosity. He has a what?

“A t-cog is the organ that allows Cybertronians to transform. You have one, so you should be able to transform like the rest of us,” she explained. “I know that you are an intelligent being because you obviously understand my words. So think about it and maybe give it a try.” She turned to leave, smiling at him over her shoulder. “I would love to see it. I’m sure your other form is just as majestic as your current one.”

The little femme jumped off the boulder and walked toward the other mechs that had gathered together. He watched her go. He noticed the mechs relaxed as she approached them. They even deactivated their blasters.

“Let’s go home,” he heard her say. A ground bridge opened beyond them. The mechs went thru first. The femme stopped to look back at him one last time and smile again. His helm dipped slightly in response. She had given him some valuable information. That was his way of showing his gratitude. Then she was gone and the portal vanished, leaving him with many things to think about.

Megatron wasn’t particularly angry that he had returned without the bone. The Autobots had probably already taken it and Shockwave assured him that they had enough bones for the project he was working on.

He was currently curled up in a corner of the flight deck, letting the sun warm his armor. He had his optics closed, trying to take a nap. However, his processor kept going back to the little femme, her smile, and, most importantly, her words. She said he could transform like the others. He wondered if it was really possible as he looked up to watch a squad of eradicons returning from patrol. They came gliding in before transforming to land with their peds on the deck. They seemed to flinch slightly when they realized he was watching them and they gave him a wide berth as they entered the Nemesis.

He snorted. All the vehicons were afraid of him. Even the ones that brought him his energon. Some were a little bolder than others. Like the one silver eradicon that bossed all the other vehicons around. But even they would flinch slightly in fear if he got too close.

Even those other mechs, the strangers with vehicon masks... That brought his thoughts back to the little femme and the idea of transformation. Perhaps he should try it. He looked around the flight deck. Not here, he wasn’t going to try it here. He wanted to be alone the first he did it so he could get used to it.

All attempts to nap now abandoned, he got to his peds and stretched leisurely. He wandered to the end of the deck and looked out at the planet surface below. He knew he probably shouldn’t leave without permission but... He coiled back like a spring and then leapt, spreading his wings to let the air carry him away from the ship.

He flew for a while, making sure no one was following him before he finally set down in a secluded little valley. The sun was getting low and the trees cast long shadows over the area. He
stood still for several minutes, unsure of how to begin. How does one transform? The little femme said it required a t-cog. And that he had one. Perhaps if he sent a signal to it--

The reaction was instantaneous. His helm and neck, even his tail were pulled inside his chassis as he stood up on his hind legs. He felt like he was somersaulting inside himself until everything came to a jerking halt and he opened his optics.

He was significantly smaller than before, that was for certain. By how much, he wasn’t sure until he could compare himself to a bot he’s met before. He looked down. His front legs and claws had become arms and servos. He turned his servos over and watched in fascination as he curled and uncurled his sharpened digits.

“Well, well, well. Looks like I was right,” said a voice.

Startled, he spun to face the voice and nearly overbalanced. A servo caught his arm to keep him upright.

“Easy there, killer. You’re not used to that form yet.”

He quickly got his balance back and pulled away from the servo. Finally focusing, he saw that it was the black mech from before, the one that commanded the others. And the little femme sitting on their shoulder, smirking, amused.

Upset, he growled at them.

The little femme frowned. “Is there something wrong with your voicebox? You seem to be in perfect condition to me.”

He frowned as well, concentrating. A variety of sounds emerged from his mouth until they finally formed some words.

“This is hard,” he said.

“Well, I suppose it is a bit different from your beast form.” She smiled again. “But I know that you can get the hang of it.”

“How did you find me?” he asked slowly.

She pointed at his chassis. “We tracked your spark signature, just like we track everyone else. I was curious about why you left the Nemesis alone." She looked him up and down. "And I’m very glad I came.”

“I must thank you for informing me of this ability. Now I can converse properly with Lord Megatron.”

“Yes. Of course. By the way, do you have a name?”

He shook his helm. “No. They never gave me one.”

“That won’t do. Someone like you needs a name. And good one. Hmmm…” She stared at him thoughtfully. “Your beast mode is a dragon. And in human mythology and legends, the dragon is often considered the king of the beasts. Coincidentally, their concept of dragons is based off your predecessors that died out on this planet long ago. Anyway, the title of ‘king’ fits you not only because you are a dragon but also, now, the top of you helm looks like a crown.”
“A crown?” he asked, confused.

She knocked on the side of the black mech’s helm. They turned slightly and projected a mirror image of him so that he could see himself.

“That is me?” He moved and the image moved with him. He touched the horn on his forehelm. “This is a crown?”

“Yes. And every king wears a crown.” The image disappeared and he looked at her again. “You are a king. You are the king, King of all predacons… Predaking.”

“Predaking…?” he repeated.

“Hm? Was it too bold of me to name you? If so, I apolo-”

“No! It is a good name. I will keep it!”

She smiled, that smile that he was slowly beginning to enjoy seeing. “I’m glad you like it.”

“But how can I be the king of the predacons if I am the only one?”

“Ah. What do you think Shockwave has been collecting all those bones for? He is cloning more of your kind.”

“I had heard rumors but I did not know if they were true.”

“Indeed. Well, it has gotten late. You should probably return to the Nemesis before someone gets upset.”

He just realized that night had almost completely fallen. “You are right.” He turned to go, then paused, looking back at her. “Will I get to see you again?”

“I certainly hope so. I would like to be your friend.”

“My friend…” He considered the thought, the corners of his mouth moving upward slightly. “Yes. I would also like that.”

Her smile grew as he transformed. “Stay well, Predaking.”

He dipped his massive helm to her with a farewell growl before leaping into the air and letting his wings carry him away.

“That went well,” Leecher said as they watched Predaking disappear into the night sky.

“Yes,” Liliy replied. “But I have this bad feeling that we may not be friends for long.”

The mask popped open to allow Liliy to climb inside.

“Worrying about it is bad for your health, you know,” Leech commented as Liliy plopped down in her seat and let them attach to her shoulder.

“Yeah… We’ll just face whatever comes. As long as I don’t have to kill him, it will be ok.”
Curious, Predaking watched the retractable lift descend from the ship into the mountain below. He wondered if this was where Shockwave had been disappearing to for the last several solar cycles. Was this where the cloning the little one had mentioned was happening? He had seen Megatron and the loathsome Starscream fly down earlier. There must be a cave entrance nearby. He flew down himself to look. It was there. He entered without hesitation. He wanted to know. He wanted to see with his own optics if there were more of his kind.

Predaking entered the enormous cavern. Twenty-four large pods, each containing yellow liquid and a nearly, fully developed predacon form, were lined up in two rows of twelve. At the far end was Shockwave’s work area. Shockwave himself stood among the pods with Megatron, Starscream, and Knock Out. They had heard him coming but he screamed at them anyway to announce his presence.

Starscream produced a metal rod from his subspace and approached him. “Unruly beast! You dare to roam freely without permission!” And smacked him twice across the helm with the rod.

Predaking suddenly screamed in his face. Startled, Starscream stumbled back with a cry, tripping over his own peds and landing on his aft, the rod falling from his servo. Predaking advanced on him menacingly. Starscream cried out in fear and curled into a ball on his side, protecting his helm with his arms. However, just as Predaking reached him, the beast transformed and glared down at him.

Starscream sat up in surprise. “Wha-?!?”

“Strike me again,” Predaking warned as he loomed over the seeker, “and I will bury that rod in your spark.”

“I-” Starscream scooted backward across the cave floor to get away from him. “I did not realize that the beast was capable of transformation.”

“Nor did I,” added Megatron glancing over his shoulder at Shockwave for an explanation.

“I am no beast!” Predaking growled.

Starscream had to quickly scoot to the side to avoid being stepped on as Predaking moved to the nearest pod to observe it.

“The ability to transform is a fundamental part of Cybertronian biology,” Shockwave offered in explanation. “We simply possessed no evidence that the predacon species ever reached that evolutionary stage since they became extinct in the Great Cataclysm.”

“And now we know,” Starscream growled after finally picking himself up off the floor.

“So… the rumors are true,” Predaking spoke. “I will no longer be alone.”

“And I see you’ve been keeping secrets,” Megatron replied, approaching him.

Predaking turned to meet him. He found it interesting that he was at least a helm taller than the warlord. “It was not my intention to deceive you, Lord Megatron. I only recently became aware of my abilities. All I remember of my beginning is hunting. And battle. And the wounding of my pride. Thus I begun to burn with questions. ‘Who am I?’ ‘Where did I come from?’ The warship’s data banks provided historical fact. But still I possessed no memory of my own past so I begun to reconsider my place in the present and wondered ‘could I be like the others?’. That’s when I met the little one and she told me that I was like them. And here I am.”
“Wait. What ‘little one’?” Starscream asked.

“Now that I think about it, she never told me her name. But she was about this tall,” he showed her height with his servos, “and had only one arm that wielded a blade that could change shape. She could also move faster than I could comprehend. Several unfamiliar mechs with vehicon masks accompanied her.”

“The Laserblade and the CRC,” Megatron growled while Starscream flinched, wings twitching.

“Are they our enemies, Lord Megatron?” Predaking asked.

“Yes they are! And if you ever come across them again, you are to kill them on sight,” he ordered.

Predaking scowled at the thought but relied, “I understand.”
Family

Romeo was about to lay down for recharge when he heard a knock on his door. He opened his door to find Foxtrot standing outside his room. He looked very tired.

“Can’t sleep?” Romeo asked.

Foxtrot just shook his helm. Romeo stepped aside, silently inviting him into his room. Foxtrot gratefully entered.

“Is it the predacon again?” Romeo asked as the door closed.

Foxtrot nodded. Romeo gently guided him over to the berth.

“Have you talked to the Madam about it?” Romeo laid down first.

Foxtrot laid down on top of him, audial resting on Romeo’s chestplates so he could listen to his spark. Romeo pulled a mesh blanket over the both of them.

“Not yet,” Foxtrot finally replied quietly while Romeo stroked his helm and neck. “She’s been really busy lately.”

“So you came to me,” Romeo said. He huffed a laugh. “Just like old times.”

Foxtrot lifted his helm to look at him. “If you don’t want me here,” he started to push himself up, “I can-”

Romeo pulled him back down with both arms and held him. “It’s not that, Fox. Besides, you’re a medic, you need your rest. If I can help you, even with just this… We are still family after all. No matter what happened in the past.”

Foxtrot laid his helm back down on Romeo’s chassis and closed his optics. “Thanks, Romy.”

“Heh.” That nickname was nostalgic. Romeo continued to stroke the medic’s helm. “Rest well, Fritz.”

“Hand me that wrench.”

X-ray grabbed the wrench that Wheeljack asked for and handed it to him.

“So, did you make up with him?” X-ray asked as he leaned down to inspect Wheeljack’s work.

“Who?” Wheeljack grunted in reply as he tightened a bolt.

“With Bulkhead.”

Wheeljack finished with the next bolt before pausing to answer. “Yeah. I talked to him. He’s still kissing up to the commander sometimes to keep the peace but he’s getting better about it…. And I promised to maybe stop peeling Magnus’ paint so much.”

“Good.” X-ray planted a kiss on the top of Wheeljack’s helm. “I’m glad.”
Ultra Magnus frowned as he turned to face Wheeljack and X-ray as they walked into the hangar. Wheeljack was trying to wipe some green liquid off his armor but only succeeded in smearing it further. X-ray followed him, still limping a bit but no longer leaning on a cane.

“Soldier, I don’t recall giving you permission to leave the base,” Magnus addressed Wheeljack.

“Because you didn’t, sir,” Wheeljack kept his tone in check, for the most part.

“Why are your servos smeared with coolant?”

“We recalibrated your ship’s engines.” Wheeljack nodded back at X-ray.

“Yeah,” X-ray added. “You can expect a twelve percent increase in vector thrust.”

Ultra Magnus raised an optic ridge at him. “You helped him? I thought you said you were a weapons engineer?”

X-ray shrugged. “Weapons are more my hobby. As an assistant to the lead engineer, I have to know how to work on pretty much everything.”

“And why exactly were you working on my ship?” asked Magnus.

“Well, you said he couldn’t leave the base,” X-ray explained, “but we wanted to spend some alone time together, so your ship was the closest thing we could work on without getting in the way of the humans.”

“Are you sure that was the only thing you guys were doing?” Bulkhead piped up, tone teasing.

X-ray rolled his optics and replied with a bit of an annoyed growl. “In case you hadn't noticed, I’m still under medical restrictions.”

Bulkhead rubbed the back of his helm sheepishly. “Ha, ha. Sorry.”

Wheeljack just smirked and shook his helm. He looked up at Magnus again. “We came back to let you know we were going over to the CRC base to take a shower… Sir.”

Ultra Magnus frowned again. “You mean ask permission to—”

He was interrupted by the sound of Optimus returning. Prime came flying in to land on his peds just outside the doors and deactivated his jetpack. The retractable wings folded up as he entered the hanger.

“Welcome back, Optimus,” greeted several of the Bots at once as they moved to gather around him once he stepped inside.

“Hey, Optimus,” X-ray called. “Just wanted to let you know that I’m taking Wheeljack home for a wash.”

Optimus saw the mess on Wheeljack’s armor and nodded. “Very well, X-ray. Just send him back quickly.”

“Yes, sir.” X-ray casually saluted before disappearing into a ground bridge with Wheeljack in tow.

“Optimus, what is the news?” asked Ratchet.
“Decepticon activity is at a low. I fear that Megatron has collected all the specimens he requires to…” He trailed off when he noticed Ultra Magnus standing back by himself. “…Clone his army,” he finished, wondering what had happened while he was gone.

Sometime later, after Wheeljack had returned without X-ray, Optimus approached Ultra Magnus who was standing at the hanger door, watching the human soldiers doing their drills outside.

“Ultra Magnus.” The mech turned at the sound of his name. “Something has been troubling you.”

“I fear that Madam Lily was right about me,” Ultra Magnus replied.

“Ah. You can drop the title, Ultra Magnus. Only Lily’s subordinates call her Madam. And as for her attitude earlier, I understand that it is frustrating, but she is like that with everyone. She has even called me an idiot a couple times. And, to be honest, she was probably right too. But, how was she right about you?”

Magnus sighed. “It seems that my command style might be having a negative effect on unit morale.”

“I see.” Optimus put a servo on Magnus’ shoulder. “Your services are most welcome, old friend. But this is not the Elite Guard.”

“Things certainly have changed since the war for Cybertron.”

Prime’s servo fell back to his side. “And, we must adapt to that change. The members of Team Prime are not cogs in a machine.” He turned to look at his team that was gathered around the main computer. “They have grown into something greater than an army.” Looking back at Magnus, “They have become-”

He was suddenly interrupted by an alarm.

“Optimus, our scanners have detected exposed energon,” Ratchet exclaimed.

The rest of the team looked at him expectantly.

“While Lily has offered to supply us, we should not rely on her completely,” Optimus said. “We will go and investigate!”

{Hey, Madam.} Lima said after Lily answered her comm. {As far as you know, the Autobots don’t know the location of Shockwave’s secret lab, right?}

“That is correct… Why?”

{Because they’re right outside it.}

Lily immediately switched channels. “Leech! Meet me in the receiving room, asap!”

{On my way!}

When Leecher arrived at the scene, Bumblebee and Arcee were preparing to push two anti-grav
carts full of energon crystals through a ground bridge while Optimus stood by.

[How much do you want to bet that this was a set-up?] Leech observed.

[[Yeah. But for who exactly?]] Liliy replied.

“Hey, Optimus,” Leecher said aloud as they approached the Prime.

“Leecher,” Optimus greeted as Arcee and Bumblebee disappeared. “What are you doing here?”

Bulkhead and Smokescreen were just emerging from the cave after not finding anything.

“We were just wondering—” Leecher started.

A massive explosion shook the earth, cutting them off.

“Whoa! What was that?” Smokescreen exclaimed, looking back at the cave.

“No. No, no, no!” Leecher cried as they checked the SDS and saw that the 24 new signals that had been in the cave were gone and there was a named signal in close proximity to the two Autobots still underground. “Fragging—” the rest of words came out as a garbled mess of Lassic.

“Leecher? What’s wrong?” Optimus demanded.

Leecher was already moving toward the cave. They shoved past Bulkhead and Smokescreen as they called back. “Wheeljack and Ultra Magnus are in danger!”

“We’re coming too!” Bulkhead insisted.

Leecher jerked to a stop in the entrance and turned to them. “No! Just Optimus will suffice. Any more than that and it will get messy.”

“Why? Who else is in there?” asked Smokescreen.

“Predaking.”

“You mean the predacon?” clarified Optimus.

Leecher nodded. “Bulkhead, you already know you don’t stand a chance against him. Optimus, at least, will be able to hold his ground. But we are the only one who can actually take him down if the situation calls for it.”

“Bulkhead, Smokescreen, return to base,” Optimus ordered. “Let Leecher and myself handle this.”

They hesitated but then they muttered acknowledgement and turned to go. Leecher waited until the two mechs passed through the ground bridge and it closed before they headed into the cave.

“I did not realize the predacon had a name,” Optimus said as he followed Leecher.

“He didn’t until Liliy gave him one,” Leecher answered.

“Liliy named him?” Optimus sounded surprised.

“Yeah. After he transformed for the first time.”

The surprise grew. “He can transform??”
“Yep. Just like the rest of us. It’s just, instead of a vehicle, he’s a dragon.”

As they approached the cavern, they heard Ultra Magnus cry out in pain. Optimus tried to rush forward but Leecher stopped in front of him and held up a servo. Ultra Magnus lay on the ground, cradling a smashed servo. Predaking, in his biped form, was walking away from him. Several meters away, Wheeljack was slumped against a boulder, unmoving, his frame half buried under a pile of rocks.

Predaking picked up the Forge from where it had fallen and turned to go back to Ultra Magnus.

“Optimus, let me handle this.”

Optimus looked at the sound of Liliy’s voice. Leecher’s mask was open and the little femme was climbing out. “Liliy? But-”

She looked up at him. “Please don’t interfere.”

There was a loud snap as Predaking broke the Forge of Solus Prime in two, letting the pieces drop in front of Magnus.

Ultra Magnus flinched when the pieces of the Forge hit the ground. He looked up at the predacon and he knew that this was likely where he was going to die. He wasn’t ready to die yet, but unless some miracle happened, his fate was inevitable. If so, he was going to stare it in the face and accept it.

“Prepare to perish!” the predacon informed him as he raised his claw to strike.

Much to Magnus’ surprise, a miracle did appear, but it was in the form he least expected. A small frame stood on top of the Forge head, their only arm held out as if to protect him.

“Predaking, stop!” they cried in a voice that he recognized as Liliy’s. “I cannot let you kill them!”

Magnus’ surprise grew when the predacon actually lowered his claw and took a step back.

“Move, little one!” Predaking snarled. “They are going to pay for what they have done!”

Liliy did not move. “I know exactly how you feel, Predaking! But killing them is not going to bring your clan back! And it won’t make you feel any better, trust me!”

Predaking’s optics narrowed. “How would you know?”

“Because…” Liliy hesitated, her servo falling to her side as she made a fist. “I killed the entire Decepticon squadron that destroyed my clan. Every last one of them. And you know what? It didn’t help at all.”

“I’m not like you!” Predaking growled.

“I’m aware but I can’t let you kill any of Prime’s family, just like I wouldn’t let you kill any of my family before.”

Family…? Ultra Magnus wondered. He wanted to ask what that meant but he felt his consciousness slipping as a multitude of warnings flashed across his HUD. The damage from the battle was finally catching up to him.
Predaking just glared at her, flexing his claws. “Move.”

“No, I won’t. And since you aren’t going to stand down either, we’ll have to make you.”

There was a whine of a blaster charging somewhere behind him and the last thing Magnus saw before he went offline was Predaking being thrown back by a bolt of energy.

Liliy waited a tense moment to see if Predaking would get up again but he just continued to lay where he had fallen, chassis smoking.

“Medics to my location,” she commed. “Two Autobots for evac.”

“Liliy…” Optimus said as he approached her while also keeping a wary optic on Predaking.

“Optimus, go with them,” replied Liliy, hopping onto Leecher’s servo so they could lift her up. “You can contact your team from my place.”

The CRC medical team was just arriving.

“What will you do?” Optimus asked.

Liliy was already back in the armor so Leecher answered for her. “Predaking needs to know the truth. We intend to tell him who exactly is behind all this.”

There was a mech next to him when Predaking came back online. It was the black mech.

“Finally awake-?!?” they started to ask.

With an angry snarl, Predaking grabbed their left arm and wrenched before ripping it from the shoulder socket. His other servo had the mech by the helm. Metal shrieked as he began to crush it.

They grabbed at his arm. “Wait, Predaking!”

One final squeeze and the helm was crushed. It popped off in Predaking’s servo as the body stumbled back. Much to his surprise, it straightened up instead of falling over.

“Fragging Primus, mech,” the voice spoke, but it was quieter and a little muffled, coming from inside the chassis. “Do you know how annoying it is to pilot this thing without the helm?”

“It’s a good thing we decided to add the secondary controls.” That was the little one’s voice coming from the chassis as well, also muffled.

“What… are you?” asked Predaking.

Liliy’s small helm popped up where the neck was supposed to be. “Armor,” she said. “This mech is just armor.”

Predaking stared in confusion. “Little one…?”

“Right. I realized earlier that I forgot to introduce myself,” Liliy said as she climbed up and perched on the top of the chest armor. “My name is Liliy. And this is Leech.” She gestured to the metal creature that was hanging off her left shoulder. The armor mimicked her movements since
only the right arm remained.

“Hi,” Leech said, their only movement was the swaying of their optic stems as their tails hung down inside the armor.

“Leech is the primary pilot of the armor,” Liliy continued.

Predaking got to his peds. “I’m sorry about this, little one, but I have to kill you now.”

Liliy frowned. “Why?”

“Because I was told that you were my enemy. Megatron ordered me to kill you on sight.”

“What kind of king takes orders?”

Predaking froze in his tracks.

“Do you know why the Autobots were here?” Liliy asked, using his hesitation to her advantage.

“It doesn’t matter,” he snarled. “I will kill th-”

“But it does matter, Predaking,” she interrupted, her voice calm, patient, as if she was dealing with a child. “This place was a secret, underground lab, impenetrable by Autobot scanners. So how did they find it?”

He didn’t answer.

“They didn’t. They came here looking for the energon that was left outside. They thought this was an energon mine, nothing more.”

“That hardly seems like a coincidence.”

“Because it wasn’t a coincidence. Megatron had the energon planted on purpose, to lead the Autobots here.”

Predaking looked startled by the news. “Why would he do that? Did he not order the creation of my brethren?”

“He did. But that was before you transformed and could actually speak your mind.”

He looked confused. “Why would that matter?”

“Megatron knows how strong your kind are. He has cloned them before to rain down destruction on the Autobots in the past. He thought he could simply do that again and conquer this planet. But then you transformed.” Liliy gestured to him with her own servo and the helmless mech she sat on mimicked her movements again. Predaking wasn’t going to admit it but it was slightly creeping him out.

“Even though you swore loyalty to Megatron,” she continued, unaware of his discomfort, “you expressed the desire to lead your kind. That scared him. You alone he can handle. You and an army of predacons would be able to wipe out the current Decepticon forces. He didn’t like that idea so he took away your army. He lured the Autobots here to do his dirty work for him. And he let you come here, hoping that either you would destroy the Autobots or they might destroy you.”

She paused to let him go over this new information. His servos curled into fists as he hissed in anger.
“What are you going to do now, Predaking?” she asked finally.

“Return to the Nemesis and confront Megatron about this!” Predaking answered with a snarl.

“Then can I ask you to promise me one thing?”

“What is it?” he snapped.

“Go after Megatron only. Don’t hurt the vehicons unless they attack you first.”

“You have a lot of demands, little one.”

“Also be careful. Megatron is as cunning as he is strong. He won’t fight fair.”

Predaking hissed. “Anything else?”

“Yeah. If you fail, I'll be sure to come pick you up.” She smiled, a small smile but it was kind and gentle and a tiny bit worried.

And it had Predaking hesitating for a moment. Then he bent his helm toward her and muttered “thank you” before he left.

Furious, Predaking returned to the Nemesis. He fought to keep his temper in check as he marched through the halls toward the bridge, the most likely place he would find Megatron. He growled at any vehicon who took too long to get out of his way. Word that he was angry must have spread around quickly because as soon as the other vehicons saw him coming, they immediately moved out of his path before he got to them.

As luck would have it, he encountered Megatron, who was walking and talking with Starscream, at a junction before the bridge. Megatron looked almost startled at the fury rolling off Predaking as he glared down at him. Starscream, on the servo, was very startled and even took a step back to put Megatron’s bulk between him and the predacon.

“Megatron!” Predaking snarled. “Is it true that you ordered the annihilation of my army?”

Megatron frowned, wondering what had happened down there, but he decided not to lie about it and just deal with the problem now.

“Indeed,” he replied, a challenge in his voice. “And it seems I am going to have to see the extermination through.” He took a step toward Predaking and unsheathed his arm blade.

With a yell, Predaking rushed at him. As he came, Megatron raised his blade and took a battle stance. Predaking bore down on him, one claw raised to take a swipe at him. Megatron easily sidestepped the attack, performed a full 360, ducking under a back swing from the predacon, and delivered a blow to Predaking’s midsection with his blade.

Startled by the sudden pain, Predaking grabbed at his chassis and took a step back. But Megatron was not going to give him a break. He brought his blade down and then back up again, slicing across Predaking’s chassis twice more. Enraged, Predaking finally reacted. He brought his arm up and managed to stop Megatron’s next down swing. Catching hold of the blade, Predaking pulled it down and then back up again, using his strength to throw Megatron into the wall behind him.

Before Megatron could fully recover, Predaking came around and slammed his fist into the
warlord’s midsection. The blow lifted Megatron off his peds and back into the wall. This time, Predaking grabbed him again and threw him bodily across the hallway. Megatron slammed into the opposite wall with enough force to leave a large dent. He caught himself with his blade point on the floor as he dropped to his knees.

“I will tear you apart!” Predaking roared as he advanced on him again.

Megatron barely managed to get back on his peds only to have Predaking raining blows down on him. He didn’t even have time to defend before an upper cut to his jaw sent him sailing down the hall. He landed with a heavy thud and groaned. But Predaking was coming at him yet again, so he got to peds as quickly as he could, sheathing his blade as he did.

Megatron was ready for Predaking this time and they grappled. At first, Predaking was able to push Megatron back a bit due to his size and forward momentum but the door behind Megatron stopped him from going any farther. Megatron yelled in Predaking’s face as he pushed back. Predaking replied in kind.

Starscream, who had simply been watching this entire time, took the opportunity to fire off one of his missiles while they were at a stalemate. It hit Predaking in the back and exploded. Predaking roared in pain and arched back, letting go of Megatron as he did. The predacon’s bulk protected Megatron from the explosion and when Predaking let go of him, he slammed his fist down on the door’s controls.

The door opened behind him.

Megatron punched Predaking in the face while he was still dazed from the blast. And then, grabbing the larger mech by the shoulders, he fell backwards into the room. He used their momentum to bring his ped up and kick Predaking over his helm. Predaking flew across the room and crashed, upside down, into an escape pod door before slumping to the floor.

Megatron got to his peds and wiped the back of his servo across his mouth. “Ah. That’s the spirit. But I was a champion of the Pits of Kaon, not only due to my savage might! But also my cunning!” He reached over and hit a button on the console next to him.

The escape pod door opened behind Predaking as he rather unsteadily got to his peds, holding onto the door frame for support. Megatron didn’t quite sneer as he reached over again and pressed a second button.

The escape pod launched. Without the door closed, it created a vacuum. Startled, Predaking grabbed the door frame with both servos and spread his peds to brace them as well. He had to hold on with all his might as the strong gusts of atmosphere rushed past him, along with a few pieces of metal that they had pulled loose.

“You should have faced me as a beast,” Megatron said, coming toward him while, at the same time, trying to fight the vacuum. “You might have stood a chance.”

Predaking looked on in growing horror as Megatron raised his blaster and fired. The shot hit Predaking square in the chest and he let go of the door frame. The vacuum pulled him out of the ship and the wind picked him up and carried along the side of the Nemesis. He cried out when he hit one of the ship’s ‘wings’ and was sent spiraling off into the growing storm clouds.

Megatron grabbed the door frame after Predaking was gone to avoid being pulled out as well. Starscream hurried over to the console and quickly shut the door.
“Bravo, my liege,” Starscream said as Megatron straightened up and turned. “It isn’t everyday one witnesses the extinction of a species all over again.”

“Let’s hope that really is the last we’ve seen of him,” Megatron growled. “The CRC tends to be ever so meddlesome.”

“Hmm. You’re right. But the damage that both you and I inflicted should be enough to keep him down for a little while.”

“We shall see.”

When Ultra Magnus opened his optics, he found himself staring at a strange, gray metal ceiling. His helm lulled to the left and he saw Optimus standing next to him, expression grim. It took a bit of effort to turn his helm again to find the source of the buzzing noise on his right. It was Ratchet working on his injured servo. When he paused for a moment and took the tool away, Ultra Magnus shakily lifted his arm to inspect the damage. He let out a ragged sigh as he laid it back down.

“Ratchet will take good care of you,” Optimus reassured him.

Wheeljack sat on the next med berth. X-ray, looking worried, stood on his right while an unfamiliar copter medic worked on his left shoulder.

“Magnus fought like a Wrecker,” Wheeljack said.

Ultra Magnus looked up at the Prime again. “Optimus…” He grimaced, like talking hurt but he still continued. “When we spoke earlier… What could be greater than an army?”

“A human concept. One I have learned since coming to Earth…”

“Family?” Liliy asked, suddenly appearing on Optimus’ shoulder.

“Yes. Family… Honestly, I did not understand what family really meant until the first time I encountered the CRC and got to see a Cybertronian example.” Optimus actually chuckled, leaving the three Autobots slack-jawed. “It was quite the learning experience.”

Liliy looked at Ratchet. “Told ya he could laugh.”

Optimus suddenly realized what she said and looked surprised himself. “I guess it has been a long time since…”

“Since the war started and you had a tremendous burden of responsibility put on you?” Liliy offered.

“Yes,” Optimus agreed, glancing down as his servo ghosted over his chestplates.

Liliy just patted his plating.

Optimus looked at Liliy. “Since you're back, I assume you finished your talk with the predacon?”

“Yes. He wasn’t particularly pleased to hear about Megatron’s involvement but it should keep him busy for a little while at least.”

“You sent him after Megatron?” asked Ratchet.
“Of course. It gives him someone to be preoccupied with instead of having him out hunting Autobots.”

“Leecher said you named him,” Optimus said.

“What?!” gasped several voices.

“Yes, I did.” Liliy replied, pleased. “And what better title to give a dragon than King of Beasts? So I called him Predaking. He is quite taken with it.”

“He also seems to be quite taken with your smile,” added Leecher as they entered the med bay.

“I don’t know what you are talking about, Leecher,” said Liliy. “By the way, what did Bravo say?”

“Make this one last. He doesn’t have time to keep fixing them.”

Liliy sighed. “Understood.”

“What happened?” asked Optimus.

“Oh, nothing for you to be concerned about.” She glanced down at Ultra Magnus and asked, “What about the new servo?”

“If you don’t mind sharing some spare parts, I can build him one,” answered Ratchet. “It may not be the best but it will be functional. Probably better than anything I could make with the resources the humans provided us with.”

Liliy stared at him. “What are you saying, Ratchet? This is the CRC. We don’t do shoddy replacements.”

“Yeah,” Leecher agreed. To Liliy, “Since we still have the blueprints for Optimus’ old frame and the servos are practically identical, Bravo left making a new one up to Whiskey.”

“There. Ya see. Ultra Magnus will be getting a perfect replacement. You won’t be able to tell the difference.”

“You… would do that for me?” Magnus asked, bewildered.

“Of course.” Liliy smiled. “You’re Optimus’ family after all. And it would be disrespectful if we gave a certain loathsome seeker a new leg but didn’t fix you properly.”

“Loathsome seeker? You mean Starscream?” asked Ratchet.

“Unfortunately, yes. This was the damage to his frame.” Leecher handed Ratchet a datapad.

Ratchet’s optics grew wide as he looked it over. “When was this?”

“Sometime between him losing his t-cog to MECH and the red energon incident.”

Ratchet passed the datapad to Optimus who looked very startled, not to mention just a little bit disturbed, after looking it over.

“I am impressed,” he said. “I saw no trace of this injury on Starscream.”

“I’m not,” Liliy grumbled. “And I intend to snap it off again if he hurts anyone else.”
“I’ll help you,” Wheeljack growled, putting his arm around X-ray’s waist and pulling him a little closer. X-ray, for his part, blushed slightly.

“Anyway, Optimus, can we talk to you for a moment? Privately?” Liliy asked.

“Of course.”

Liliy nodded to Leecher. The black mech turned and headed for the door. Optimus followed. They left the med bay and crossed the main hall to go to Leecher’s office. Once the door was closed, Liliy leapt off Optimus’ shoulder and landed gracefully on the desk. Then she rounded on him.

“I’m sorry but why is Ratchet here?”

“I thought that Ultra Magnus would be more comfortable if Ratchet was the one doing his repairs.”

“Oh, ok. Babying your commander. I see.” She waved him off. “Whatever. As long as Ratchet gets along with Oscar and Foxtrot, it’s fine I guess.”

“Was that all you wanted to talk to me about?”

“No…” Liliy moved over and sat on the box that Leecher kept on the desk exactly for that purpose. She leaned back on her servo so she could look up at him easier. "I sent Bravo to Cybertron like I said I would. He has already started making plans to rebuild the Omega Lock."

Prime’s optics went wide. “Is that even possible?”

Liliy chuckled. “This is Bravo we’re talking about. A genius among engineers. I’m sure he’ll be able to find a way. The only problem this time might be mechpower.”

“If we can be of any help…"

“I’ll keep that in mind. Charlie also reports no change, so it would be best if the Lock is rebuilt.”

Optimus smiled a little. “That would be a relief. By the way, Liliy, there is something I wanted to ask you about.”

Something in his voice made her sit up. She probably was not going like his question. “What is it?”

“I thought you said the predacon was your first kill after Megatron.”

It was Leecher who ended up answering since Liliy looked like she had shut down behind her visor. “...That was her first kill after the second time she tried to go after Megatron. But she never got any closer than being able to sense his spark on the edge of her perception before she panicked and we had to get her out of there. Back then, she suffered from nightmares every time she recharged and even from dark visions that haunted her while she was awake. It wasn’t just her clan that she saw either. The Cons she killed would show up as well. That is why the ‘boys’ are all ex-Cons. A form of repentance, of sorts.”

“Do they know about this?” Optimus asked.

“At this point, it is doubtful that they would care. This family would not be what it is without Liliy.”

“In that case, I apologize.”

“Accepted… this time.” Leecher leaned over the desk and nuded Liliy. “Hey, Lil’. Still with us?”
Her frame jerked slightly and she looked up. “Hmm? What were we talking about?”

“Was there anything else you needed to talk to Optimus about?” Leecher asked.

“Um… No? Not that I can think of.”

“Then if there is nothing else, you’ll have to excuse us, Optimus. Liliy has a promise to keep.”

Liliy looked up at Leecher. “He left the ship?”

“Yes. Echo just informed us. Probable crash landing. Hasn’t moved for twenty minutes.”

“Then we better hurry,” Liliy said, stepping onto the servo that Leecher offered. “Have Kilo and Seasar meet us in the receiving room.”

“Who are you talking about?” asked Optimus.

“It’s nothing, Optimus,” Liliy replied as she climbed into Leecher’s helm. Taking her seat and letting Leech attach to her shoulder, she smiled out at him. “We’re just going to clean up a mess like we always do.”

A steady downpour greeted them when they stepped out of the ground bridge. It had been raining for a while given the amount of water pooling around their peds. A large clap of thunder rolled in the distance and the already dark clouds were getting darker as the sun went down behind them.

“Let’s hurry,” Leecher ordered and headed off in the direction that Predaking’s signal was located.

Seasar and Kilo, the only two that came along, were quick to follow.

They found Predaking in bot mode at the end of a long furrow of upturned earth that he created when he crashed after his fall from the Nemesis. He was already half buried in the mud and the rain was washing more of it over his frame. His biolights glowed dimly in the gathering darkness and Leecher could faintly make out the gaping hole in his chest armor.

He seemed to be unconscious but as Kilo pulled him out of the mud, he groaned. Leecher leaned over him, wiping a bit of mud off the side of his face. He opened his optics and blinked up at them. Leecher’s mask split open and Liliy looked out at him.

“Predaking,” she said.

The corner of his mouth turned up just a little. “...You really did come for me,” he managed tiredly.

“Of course.” She smiled back at him. “Don’t worry. We’ll take good care of you. Just rest for now.”

“Mmm,” he acknowledged before falling back into stasis.

The mask snapped shut to keep the water out as Leecher straightened. A ground bridge appeared. Predaking was a big mech but Kilo still managed to pick him up and carry him through the portal easily enough. Seasar hurried after him. But Leecher remained for a moment, staring at the glowing vortex, the only light now amid the pouring rain.

[[Are we doing the right thing?]] Liliy wondered.
[You’re asking that now?] Leech was quick to reply.

[[You’re right. I shouldn’t worry about it.]]

And Leecher disappeared into the portal, back to base.

When Leecher came back, Foxtrot and Romeo were waiting for them. Foxtrot wore a rather unset­tled expression while basically hugging himself. Romeo was right next to him, trying to be comforting. He looked at Leecher when they arrived and glanced in the direction of the lab before turning back to comforting Foxtrot again.

Inside Leecher, Liliy facepalmed, realizing what was wrong. Foxtrot was one of the first six. The first six vehicons she and Leech had saved. From a *predacon*. And of the six, Foxtrot had had it the worst. The predacon had bit his arm off. It took him a long time to recover. And a lot longer to stop having nightmares. In fact, it was Romeo who had helped with that.

At the time, the team’s newest recruit, the flirtatious mech that he used to be back then, took a shining to the miserable medic and somehow a relationship blossomed. Fritz, as he was called back then, improved a lot thanks to Romeo. But they eventually realized they were not suited to be lovers and the relationship came to an end with them as just good friends.

Then, of all the bots to attack last week, Predaking had to choose Foxtrot, pinning the poor mech under his claw. It was clear that the incident had affected Foxtrot greatly. And he had, once again, turned to Romeo for support.

Liliy climbed out of the Leecher armor and into their servo.

“Foxtrot,” she called, reaching for him.

Romeo reached over and took her from Leecher. Then he carefully passed her to Foxtrot who cradled her kneeling form in both of his servos. He lifted her up so they could touch forehelms.

“Foxtrot, I’m sorry for not noticing earlier,” Liliy apologized.

“It’s ok, ma’am,” Foxtrot said. “You’ve been really busy lately.”

“It is not okay, Foxtrot. I should have noticed. I’m sorry.”

“Just to be clear,” Romeo interrupted. “That predacon you just brought back isn’t going to be living here, is he?”

“No,” Liliy replied firmly. “He is going down to the catacombs once we are finished with his repairs. Which Seasar, Delta, and I will handle. While he is fond of me, I don’t need him scaring any of you,” she bumped her helm against Foxtrot’s again, “any more than he already has.”

Foxtrot smiled a little, a mischievous twinkle in his optics. “Thanks, *mom.*”

Romeo snorted.

And Liliy, on her part, grinned. “I love you too, *son.*”
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