Darkness of the Soul

by Misgel

Summary

Jack Darby never wanted to be a part of the Autobot-Decepticon War. All he wants is to go back to the way things were, before tragedy tore his life apart. It was supposed to be a simple recon mission into an abandoned energon mine. Jack didn’t expect for the Decepticons to be there, and for the mine to collapse. He didn’t expect to be at the mercy of Megatron.
Hi, everyone! I had a ton of ideas what to write for a Transformers fanfiction, mostly interactions between different characters, and of course, Megatron. After some thought, I settled on this one. This chapter takes place in the episode Rock Bottom, but the chapter can be read without watching it. I hope you guys enjoy!

“Jack!”

“Arcee!”

The cobalt femme had her servo reached out, as if to take his hand. Jack moved to rush forward, to meet her halfway.

Then the ground disappeared.

Jack snapped his eyes open with a gasp, only for his breath for air to turn into desperate coughing. The back of his throat felt dry, tickled by something that had invaded his mouth. Leaving behind an awful taste. The sixteen-year-old boy turned to his side, hacking. He spat, trying to get the horrible taste in his mouth.

His body radiated with pain. His head was pounding, like someone was hitting the inside of his skull with a hammer. Soreness moved across his muscles in waves, shooting up from his leg.

Jack tried opening his eyes to see, but they only stayed closed. He only saw darkness. What? What was going on? Jack blinked his eyes several times. Still darkness. It was then he realized. His eyes were open. He was surrounded by was inky blackness.

Where was he?

Instinctively, Jack reached out, trying to feel his surroundings. Only for his palms to press against something sharp and jagged. The poor boy yelped in pain, retreating his stinging hands. They felt wet. Depending on touch, Jack patted his hands on his hips. He felt a bulky object in his pocket and pulled it out. The teenager opened up his flip phone, only for his eyes to be assaulted by the harsh white light of the screen. He squinted his burning eyes and immediately he turned the screen around.

Only to see solid rock all around him.

Jack’s stomach knotted. Then he remembered. He was underground. The memories came flooding back.

He was in a mine—no, an energon mine.

He had been with Arcee, following a tunnel that led deeper into the mountain—scanning for any energon the Decepticons might have missed when they stripped the mine. The tunnel to lead to a massive cavern, and the heart of the mining operation. Only to be greeted by the sight of two Decepticons. Starscream and Megatron. The twisted second-in-command and leader of the Decepticons. Starscream was on his knees and his wings were flat on his back, making high-pitched
noises in their language—*Cybertronian*—with a foreboding Megatron standing over him, a charged fusion cannon aimed at his lieutenant’s head.

Jack had realized too late they had walked in on an execution. Deep-blue eyes locked with blood-red optics, and all hell broke loose.

Arcee threw him towards the closest cover and began a giant robot Wild West-style shootout with the pair of Decepticons. Megatron’s rogue shot must have caused the cave-in. Apparently he fired at just the right (rather, horribly wrong) spot where the mine’s integrity was weak. The next second there was a terrible noise and everything came crashing down.

Jack closed his eyes. Where was Arcee? She had been running towards him just as the ceiling collapsed. Then the ground fell beneath them. Now here Jack was, at rock bottom. Literally.

The boy pivoted his phone around him, trying to get a bearing of his surroundings. He must have not been out long, because thick, but translucent debris hung in the air like smoke. Massive boulders towered over him, the earthen walls uncomfortably close. Jack wasn’t claustrophobic, but he could feel the edges of panic.

The teenager inhaled to fill his lungs, only to intake a mouthful of dust. The poor boy hacked again, holding his hand to his sore chest. It took two more tries before he could finally let out a shout.

“ARCEE!”

His voice echoed through his surroundings, bouncing off the walls like a bad remix, getting fainter and fainter until it was undistinguishable and gone altogether. Jack waited for a solid minute.

Nothing.


Jack’s heart quickened in concerned fear and panic. They could be separated by tons of displaced soil. For all Jack knew, his guardian could be on the other side of the mountain, or buried deeper into the Earth. But what if she *couldn’t* reply? Arcee could have been injured, or worse.

Where were Bulkhead and Miko? The pair had entered the mines ahead of them, exploring another section of the tunnels. Were they trapped as well? Or did they get out?

Where were the Decepticons? Starscream had vanished during the fight—Jack was too busy running for cover to see where he went—but he heard Megatron’s furious bellow. The human lost sight of the Decepticon leader when the ceiling came down, when it fell on top of the warlord.

Jack hoped it meant the Decepticons had been killed in the accident, but he knew it was doubtful. The boy then prayed at least hostile aliens were as far away from him as possible.

Meanwhile, he was alone. Completely, utterly alone. In sheer darkness and no way to communicate. No obvious way to escape. Every child’s worst nightmare, and he was living it.

The teenager’s concern was turning into a panic attack. His breath had quickened, and his body was trembling—he did not know why. Jack tried to pull himself back from the edge of hyperventilating.

*Calm down, Jack. Panicking right now is not going to solve anything.*

That was the one thing his parents taught him. Both of their jobs required them to stay calm and focused, and they made sure to pass on that lesson to their son. Before *he* left. Sometimes Jack
wished he could’ve been like his mom, who would walk through a door to find the ghastliest of injuries and not even twitch. There was one story where a man lost an arm to a motorcycle accident (which made her thrilled when she learned her sixteen-year-old son’s first vehicle would be one).

Focus.

Wasn’t there something that oxygen deprivation did things to a person’s mind? Great, that’s how he was going to die. He was going to go crazy and pass out and be the next big missing person mystery of the century.

Calm down.

Jack took a deep breath, which just ended in a pitiful cough, and thought. He didn’t know how much air he had, but he could tell not a lot. He needed to find a way out of the mines, or at the very least, find the others. They had to be down here. He needed to find them. He needed to find Arcee. Standing around wasn’t going to help.

The boy shifted, folding his legs underneath him and shakily rising to his feet. The simple action suddenly intensified the pounding in his head, the pain radiating across his body. Jack hissed and grounded his teeth. He must have fallen pretty hard during the cave-in.

He took an unsteady step, using his phone as a makeshift flashlight, only to step on a pile of loose rock. The teenager let out a cry as he slipped forward, feet flying into the air and his back slamming into the knife-like rocks. He slid down the mini-rock slide, coming to a stop at a solid floor. Jack groaned in discomfort.

“Scrap,” the boy cursed his luck.

Suddenly there was another groan, but it didn’t come from him. Instead it came all around him, ending with a muffled noise from far above. Jack glanced up, his heart jumping to his throat, recognizing the sound. His phone-light caught a few clouds of dust falling from the ceiling, but it seemed to hold steady.

Jack swallowed. It wasn’t going to hold forever.

With that, he climbed to his feet, again, this time staying upright. Holding his phone out in front of him, he weaved through the collapsed tunnels. The human had to remember how to breathe as he navigated the tight spaces. Most of the time the rock was brushing against him—even ripping his sleeve at one point—and he either had to double over or crab-walk in order to fit into the tight spaces. Several times the earth around him groaned, threatened to fall again. He even instinctively covered his head each time.

However, as Jack traveled further and further, there were still no signs of the Autobots. Jack’s gut twisted. Where were they? He just hoped they were okay. How long had it been? Minutes? Hours?

One thing was for sure. He had to find Acree. He needed her. It took several times for Jack to suck in enough oxygen without coughing. Then he yelled at the top of his lungs, uncaring of who heard him.

“ARCEE!!”

Jack waited a minute. Then two. Then—

Flump.
The human’s heart quickened. He prayed it was actually *something*, instead of the shifting of the earth as the rock displaced further.

*Flump.*

No. That was definitely *something*. After been spending so much time with the Autobots, he had gotten used to the metallic sounds of their bodies as if they were his own heartbeat. There was a metallic twinge to the sound. Like metal hitting stone.

“Arcee?!” The noises sounded like they were coming from up ahead, further down the tunnel. This time Jack’s heart quickened in excitement. He couldn’t help it. He ran forward. He finally found his partner. He could finally get out.

He was only greeted with a clawed hand.

The poor boy screamed and backpedaled so fast that he tripped over his own feet. *Huge* talons grated the earth beside him. Jack covered his ears and gritted his teeth at the horrible noise it made, and cringed when he saw how close the deep grooves were next to his legs.

Suddenly there was an explosion.

Jack yelled in surprise and instinctively covered his face with his arms as rock and dust was sent in all directions. His ears were assaulted by the shattering of stone and boulders scraping against each other. Wincing, Jack covered them when there was an *awful* sound of grating metal, slicing across the bedrock with a horrible high-pitched noise. Then the human became aware of a crushing weight on his right leg, causing him to cry out.

Through the settling dust, Jack saw crimson light fill the small cavern, illuminating his dark surroundings. He whimpered and tried to sink back into the soil around him.

For the second time that day, eye meet optic.

“Well, what do we have here?” Megatron mused, in his deep, rasping voice. The volume of the tone alone was enough to make Jack’s ribcage rattle.

Megatron *looked* like an evil alien warlord. Metal framed his battle-scarred faceplates, almost like a helmet. Jack’s eyes lingered a few seconds on the monster’s wicked sharp teeth—*denta*—before looking at the rest of his body. The wall of stone before Jack had been replaced with jagged, silver metal, shaped into sharp, dangerous armor.

The Decepticon was titanic. In the low ceiling of the cavern, he was in a forced crouch, but still hovered almost thirty feet above Jack’s head. If he was standing upright, he had to be almost four stories tall. The width of the warlord’s jagged, broad shoulders was almost the length of a school bus. The claws digging into the earth dangerously close to the human were longer than his entire torso. Jack was frozen. He just stared, wide-eyed and mouth agape. Suddenly the boy’s throat and mouth felt a thousand times drier. His heart hammered against his chest, pounding loudly in his eyes. He wondered if Megatron could hear it.

He had never met the Decepticon warlord in person. Jack had seen videos and pictures of him. He had been told plenty of stories of him. Mostly ones describing the atrocities the tyrant had committed in the name of power.

“So, pet, where is your master?” the Decepticon sneered, violently breaking Jack from his thoughts.

The human couldn’t answer, speechless as he stared into those terrifying optics. They glowed
brighter than Jack’s phone, illuminating him with a crimson light. They filled with a hatred and bloodlust no human could ever fathom. Jack’s mouth moved, but no sound came. He tried to move, only to flail pathetically. He only got another inch between him and those gnarly fangs. Apparently the tyrant grew tired of waiting for a reply.

“Nothing to say? Don’t tell me the Autobots left you down here?”

Finally Jack swallowed, which was painful because of his raw throat. His voice came back.

“N-no,” he answered, hating himself that he didn’t sound as strong as he wanted.

Megatron must have picked up on it, because his tone was mocking, “Oh? And where are your dear allies?”

“Close.” The Decepticon saw right through the lie. His lips curled back in a wicked grin—which looked more terrifying than one of his snarls. Chills went up and down Jack’s spine.

“You really have no idea where they are, do you?” the warlord taunted. Jack had no answer. There was a deep, rumbling sound. It took several long moments for Jack to realize it was a growl. No. A chuckle. “Then it seems we are both in a predicament.”

At first, Jack was confused at his words. Then he peered through the gloom and realized. One of Megatron’s arms was in full view, claws digging into the ground. The other, the one with the fusion cannon was out of sight, along with Megatron’s lower body. Buried underneath tons of solid sedimentary rock.

“At least I’m not the one stuck in a pile of dirt,” Jack retorted, trying to use mockery to reclaim his voice.

In a moment of lunacy, a part of the teenager wanted to laugh. Eons of war, and it was the bedrock of the planet the Decepticon despised that would be his downfall. Megatron let out a menacing growl, not appreciating the jab. This time Jack’s entire skeleton shook at the deep, intense sound.

“A temporary setback,” the warlord huffed.

“What? Your buddies bailed on you?” Jack taunted, glad his spirit was coming back. He still leaned as far away as possible. He wondered if Megatron, not knowing human slang, knew what he was saying, but the warlord got the gist.

“Starscream will pay for his deceit,” he growled, making Jack’s bones rattle.

“Don’t see how that’s gonna happen.”

There was a loud, rumbling noise as Megatron snapped his jaws like an irritated lion. The boy flinched at the harsh sound and realizing he touched a sore spot.

“Your position is no better than mine,” the Decepticon pointed out, venomously. “You are trapped here as much as me. In fact, there is nothing stopping me from terminating you right now.”

To prove his point, suddenly the tyrant’s free arm moved. A claw neared. Jack yelped and flailed again, only his back to ram into the jagged rocks behind him, cutting into his skin.

His mouth moved before he could stop it. “Wait, wait, wait!”

By some miracle, the claw paused. Jack didn’t dare move a muscle, not even breathe. The sharp tip
rested on his chest. All Megatron had to do was twitch, and he was dead.

“Something to say, fleshling?” the tyrant inquired.

Jack swallowed, which hurt his sore throat. His mind raced as he tried to find words—how to convince this evil monster not to kill him. The human blurted the first thing that came to mind.

“I-I can get you out,” the teenager said, though his voice wasn’t as confident as he wanted it to be. More like a pathetic squeak.

“And what could an insect do?” Megatron challenged.

The Decepticons’ low opinion of his race was no secret. Jack never really understood why they despised humans so much—a civilization that never did anything to them. Except the fact they had the core belief that anything smaller than them was inferior—and as such, humans were the equivalent to insects.

Jack had an idea.

“The drillers,” he gasped. “They could work.”

He saw them in the cavern before the cave-in. Massive vehicles that were really just gigantic drills on wheels. Acree explained once that they were used on Cybertron for mining operations. It seemed like a basic solution to Jack. Megatron didn’t think so. The tyrant gave a series of growls—laughter.

“How could you operate such a thing?” the Decepticon leader demanded.

The drillers were built for Cybertronians, and had no adjustments for humans. Just an idea of a little being driving something meant for giants was comical. But it was the only machine capable of helping Megatron out of his predicament. And getting them out of this hell. The desperate idea was enough for the boy to regain his spirit.

“Do you want my help or not?” Jack snapped. Even he was surprised. An optic ridge rose skeptically, and suddenly the red light disappeared for a moment.

The claw moved.

Jack’s heart jumped to his throat in sheer panic. He couldn’t move. The teenager turned his head and shut his eyes tight as the talon filled his vision. He was going to die down here. He braced for unimaginable pain, to feel his guts being ripped out. It never happened.

Instead, there was a sound of grating stone and the crushing weight on Jack’s leg disappeared. A sharp, stinging sensation covered his skin, adding to his agony. Jack’s head swam as he saw dark blood seeping from his leg, staining his shredded jeans. It wasn’t deep enough to be fatal, but the wound would definitely scar.

It took him a while to digest what just happened. Did Megatron just free him? Jack looked back up, his eyes going wide. The titan had removed him from his prison with just a flick of a finger. But why?

“Let’s see just how useful you are. Very well, human,” Megatron spat the word like it was curse. “Free me, and I will let you live. If not—” Jack shrunk again as the tip of the giant’s claw was back on his chest, right above his heart. The threat could not be more obvious. “Then you better hope I never find you.”
What was he thinking? Jack repeatedly chastised himself, cursing his luck and his stupidity. He continued his subterranean journey, now a heavy weight on his chest. The teenager tried to shove down the flurry of emotions in his chest—pain, fear, anger, and most of all, shame. He could have fled, he could have told Megatron off, he could have done anything. Instead, he had done nothing except curl into a pathetic ball and beg for his life. Because he was a coward.

Arcee wouldn’t have done that.

No, the gutsy Autobot took the warlord head-on, despite he was five times bigger than her. Because she was brave.

Dad would be so disappointed in you.

The boy could practically hear his father’s—no, don’t go there. The man was gone. Now was not the time to dwell on the past. He had to focus. He had to get out of here.

But how was that possible, if Jack was now bound to the Decepticon leader himself? Well, there was nothing bound between them. Nothing physically, at least, but Megatron’s order was clear. Jack boldly wanted to laugh it off, that the warlord had no chance of escape. He knew he was wrong even as he thought it.

Megatron had survived much, much worse. The monster was at the heart of an explosion when the Autobots destroyed the Decepticon’s spacebridge, which was the equal force to a nuclear bomb. It turned Megatron’s body into a lifeless husk, and should had turned him into scrap. But he had returned from the dead. Literally. Because of a power all Cybertronians feared.

Dark energon. The lifeblood of Unicon, the Chaos Bringer.

So Jack doubted he could escape his deal with the Lord of the Decepticons. But he doubted just as much that Megatron would honor their agreement. He wondered if he would ever get out of the mine alive. He could hear Megatron’s laughter. No wonder the warlord had no faith in him. He only agreed for an excuse to kill the human. Not that he needed one, but Jack wouldn’t put it past him.

The teenager lost track how long he wandered the dark tunnels. The drillers had to have fallen during the cave-in as well. Or, they were at least somewhere in this mine.

Suddenly Jack blinked.

Then he blinked again.

No, it had to be a trick. Up ahead, was a light.

It reflected off the wall before him, coming from around a corner. Jack’s heart fluttered with excitement. Maybe it was a way out! But as the human neared, he realized it wasn’t natural sunlight. The light had a blue, alien hue. The teenager followed it around the curved corridor. His eyes widened at what he saw.

Crystals. Jagged pillars crisscrossed the cavern, either expanding across the entire height of the cave or broken off with sharp ends. Sharp clusters replaced stone walls. Every crystal was a cerulean hue, even giving off colored light so that an aura surrounded entire formations. As Jack cautiously entered the cavern, his hair immediately stood on end. It wasn’t from fear. It was from the pure energy that filled the air. Coming from the blue crystals.
At least we know where that signal came from, Jack mused to himself. The boy’s felt excitement building up in his chest.

He remembered during his visits at the base that the Autobots would complain that their energon storage levels were low. It was a concern that all Cybertronians—Autobots and Decepticons alike—shared, as they needed the energy fuel to function, just like a human needed to eat. But the Decepticons always managed to find an energon source first, leaving the Autobots to pick up the scraps. But this was enough to last the Autobots for months. Just wait until he could tell Arcee!

Jack rounded a gigantic crystal—the size of a bus—and saw another intriguing sight. A pitch-black vehicle that was twice the size of a semi-truck, with treads large enough to go over a monster truck. Wicked-looking spikes made up the front, coming together to form a drill. The sight of the driller brought Jack down from his high quick, and reminded him of his situation. Of his deal with Megatron.

The driller was damaged, covered in dents and scrapes, and it was covered in dirt, but it was still in one piece. It was haphazardly parked on a rubble of rocks, tilted at an odd angle. But the treads were still stationed on the ground, meaning they would have traction. Now Jack had to find a way to reach the controls.

Jack squinted and peered through the darkness. He noticed the reason the driller wasn’t toppling over was because it was leaning against a pillar made of energon. The unrefined crystal was jagged, broken at some places and spouting branch-like structures at others. The boy had an idea. A horrible idea, but one all the same.

He used to go rock-climbing all the time. He would go camping in the Rocky Mountains, and made the sport a past-time. Let’s see if I still got it.

With that, the boy began scampering up the side of the gigantic crystal like it was a cliff face. He buried his fingers and toes in the smallest of footholds, going from one to the next. It was slow-going, but manageable. Energon was apparently sturdier than rock, because it didn’t collapse once. Jack was panting by the time he fell onto the driller’s hood.

Looking at the controls, the boy could finally see why Megatron doubted him. The hood was made up of a touchscreen—they must have been the controls. There were a pair of levers, each as almost as tall as him.

“Here goes,” Jack murmured aloud, laying his palm on the large circle in the center of the screen. He hoped it was the “on” button.

He got his answer when suddenly the driller let out a monstrous roar, engine humming to life. However, the machine was not moving. Thinking of human vehicles, Jack glanced down at the floor of the machine, only to find it empty. The levers, then.

The teenager picked one and leaned his shoulder against it. Using all his weight and strength, he pushed it towards the front of the vehicle. Only for the driller to in reverse.

Jack let out a startled yelp as the vehicle slammed into a wall behind it, throwing him across the hood. The driller did not topple over. The human groaned.

“Right, alien,” he mumbled.

Jack got to his feet and pushed the lever again, this time backwards. The driller moved forward. It
slid off the pile of rubble with ease and the massive drill dug into the closest wall. True to its function, the driller cut through solid stone like butter. There was a tall shield that separated the hood from the drill, so Jack wasn’t in any danger of flying debris.

As his confidence over the giant machine grew, so did his spirit. Maybe he wasn’t chained Megatron like he thought. The Decepticon leader was trapped, and Jack had a way of escape. He could find the Autobots. He didn’t have to find an exit—he could make one. Then he and his friends would go back to the base, where they were far away from the Decepticons. Megatron already wanted to kill him—and was most likely planning to do so once Jack freed him—so what was one more excuse?

Then Jack realized his train of thought.

If he made an exit, he would be making one for Megatron, too. Then Megatron’s threat would be the least of his concerns. Megatron would be free to continue to be a menace against the Autobots, humanity, and the Earth itself. It was not a matter of if the warlord escaped, but when.

Jack made a decision.

The drill burst through the stone wall, sending debris flying into the cavern. Jack tapped the controls and the drill came to a slow stop. Was he too late? The human quickly clambered up the hood of the driller, peering over the side to look down. Megatron was in the same place Jack had left him.

The look on the warlord’s face was relatively impassive, only raised optic ridges betraying his surprise.

“You humans are interesting creatures,” he murmured. Jack said nothing, only continued to stare at the monster that wanted to destroy his home. Megatron tilted his head at his silence. “Well? Aren’t you going to honor our agreement?”

Jack balled his fists to keep them from trembling. It was then Megatron realized, his optics flaring with amusement and letting out a low chuckle.

“Ah… You did not come with noble intentions.” It was not a question.

Jack swallowed. He could end the war… He could save his friends. He could save the world. All with a touch of a button and flick of a switch. The driller would carve into Megatron’s metal hide and tear into his spark. None of the Decepticons would know that their fearsome leader had gotten snuffed by a mere human.

“If that is the case,” Megatron rumbled, shattering Jack’s thoughts, “you might as well use your drill to finish me. I guarantee you will never have a better opportunity.”

Jack’s nails dug into his palm, causing pain, but it still didn’t stop his arms from trembling. He couldn’t help the emotions that welled up in his chest and made his head swim.

Megatron was a monster… He destroyed his own homeworld, murdering billions of lives. When the war spread to other solar systems, the Decepticons had annihilated hundreds of planets. They would bleed a world dry of all its natural resources and leave it as a lifeless shell. Earth was next on the list. The Autobots stressed that every day, and it was why they vowed to protect their new home.

But it seemed too easy. Too good to be true. Thousands of years and thousands of battles, all the horrible stories Jack had been told, and it would only take a flick of a switch.
“Well?” Megatron demanded, impatient. “What are you waiting for?” Unlike the human, apparently, he wasn’t squeamish about death, as his deadly tone was mocking. “Think of the glory! Seize the day! You know Optimus would…”

Hearing the name snapped Jack out of his trance. Optimus Prime, leader of the Autobots. Guardian of freedom of all sentient life.

“Every sentient being has the right to choose their own destiny,” the sage had once told Jack.

The human looked down on the sterling giant before him. Megatron was hopelessly stuck. His main weapon was out of commission, and he was out of arms-length to attack. The Cybertronian was defenseless. Eons of war, and he would die on an alien planet, forgotten by his own subordinates. Something told Jack that was not his choice, even if it was what he deserved. If Jack killed Megatron now, it wouldn’t be ending a war. It would be murder. He would be no better than the tyrant.

No, Optimus Prime would not end it this way.

Jonathan Darby would not end it this way.

“No,” Jack said. “Not like this.”

The teenager flicked the switch.

The drill spun to life with another deafening hum. It surged forward.

Digging into the rock above Megatron.

The driller cut through as easily as it did before, displacing tons of sedimentary rock in mere seconds. Jack carefully pivoted, carving off a large section of the wall like taking a scoop of ice cream. He powered down the drill, the humming instantly dying to a low whine. The spikes slowed to a stop.

Jack did not look.

His throat was tight. His chest was tight. His entire body was shaking. Jack did not look, even when there was the shifting of boulders, falling and scraping across the ground with loud claps. The sound was accompanied by a screech of metal, grinding against the stone. The turning of gears and the pull of cables could be heard as their owner righted himself. Jack winced at the loud, echoing stomp.

“I did my part,” Jack said, summoning courage to speak. It was easier with his back turned to the monster. “Now you can leave.”

“Yes... I suppose we can.”

Jack was too busy staring at an interesting spot between his feet, warring with himself, he didn’t catch onto Megatron’s word choice. Or see the silver shadows encasing him. Only when he did, it took too long for his body to react. He tried to bolt, but Megatron’s fingers were already ensnared around him. The boy struggled.

“Hey! This wasn’t the deal!” he snarled, pushing against the metal cage. It didn’t even budge.

“I agreed to spare your life, in return of you sparing mine,” Megatron replied. “Since you upheld your promise... I intend to uphold mine. I am quite curious if the Autbots value their pet.”

“Let me go!” Jack demanded, desperate enough to punch the metal, only for the pitiful attack to bounce off harmlessly and leave a split bruise on his knuckle.
Suddenly the talons around the human tightened, pressing against his sore sides. Jack gasped as he felt the air squeezed from his lungs. He tried to wiggle free, but he couldn’t move. His chest burned. It wasn’t until his head spun and stars filled his vision that Megatron finally loosened his grip.

Jack greedily sucked in stale air, only to go in yet another coughing fit. He curled into a feeble position on his captor’s palm. The world shook at the deep rumbling sound of the Decepticon leader’s chuckle.

“How fragile you creatures are,” Megatron observed, condescendingly.

Suddenly the metal giant turned the human over in his palm, so that the boy was flat on his back, forced to stare into those hellish optics. Without his permission, his body began shaking uncontrollably, especially as Megatron’s faceplates curled, revealing nearly all of his razor-sharp denta in a wicked, evil grin.

All because of his stupid, naïve, horrible mistake.

“Rest assured, I will be sure to share the details of our little conversation with Optimus,” Megatron continued in a pleasured purr, “the day I rip out his spark!”
Battle of the Mines

Once enough oxygen had returned to Jack’s brain, he understood why Megatron had spared him. A hostage.

The Decepticon leader knew there were Autobots nearby, and decided to use the perfect leverage. Maybe he realized it was unwise to have a full-on battle in an unstable environment, or the sadist really wanted to mess with his enemies. Either way, Jack cursed his miserable luck.

Megatron held his captive in his palm, securing the human against his chest. Whenever Jack moved or struggled, a light squeeze would discipline him. Not that the boy could provide much of a fight, anyway.

Whatever endorphins that were blocking the pain from his injured leg were gone, now a steady throb pulsing from the limb. Blood seeped from the deep gash, staining the metal around him, but Megatron didn’t seem to notice. Some of it had dried, trying to seal the wound, but the simplest of movements would reopen it. Jack merely gritted his teeth, trying bear through the agony.

If he couldn’t escape from his captor, he could at least challenge him. Jack doubted he would make it out of this alive.

“Kill me, and the Autobots would retaliate,” Jack pointed out. “Arcee would come after you.”

“That little cretin?” Megatron scoffed. “I do not fear the Autobots, especially your pathetic master.” The monster curled his faceplates in a snarl.

Jack knew he couldn’t seem weak in front of Megatron, or else the monster would slaughter him like a wolf consuming a lamb. The boy swallowed and narrowed his eyes, upholding a brave façade.

“She’s tougher than you think, you know,” he proclaimed. “She almost beat your aft.” Then he dared to add with a smirk, “And Acree doesn’t miss.”

A dangerous growl came from the warlord’s chest, displeased of being reminded of the fight that caused this whole mess. Jack couldn’t help but flinch, bracing for the Decepticon leader to retaliate, or at least rebuke him. Instead he was surprised at Megatron’s response.

“You’re bold for a pest,” Megatron mused in a low purr. “Or incredibly foolish.”

“Just because we’re smaller than you doesn’t mean humans can’t stand ourselves,” Jack retorted.

“Hmm, that remains to be seen. Tell me, boy, does your Ar-cee value you?”

Jack flinched at the sudden question. He didn’t fully understand the Decepticon’s meaning. Value? They were friends—he knew that much. He glared at the tyrant.

“We’re partners,” he proclaimed. Megatron suddenly made another harsh noise that pounded Jack’s hearing.


Megatron was surprisingly silent after that as he navigated the tight tunnels. He didn’t take the driller, much to Jack’s surprise. When he dared to ask why, the Decepticon leader merely stated he did not need such a thing.
Most of the tunnels were caved in, having an optional path be interrupted by a wall of boulders. At the same time, the titan had to stay doubled over for most of the trip, and if the tunnel was too narrow, he would either dig it out with his claws or blast the rock with his fusion cannon. Jack almost screamed whenever he did the latter, remembering the last time the dictator fired his primary weapon. However, it seemed Megatron remembered as well, as he seemed careful whenever he aimed his fusion cannon. Usually he would give a pause for thought, sometimes even testing the earth with his talons first.

It was an awkward and unnerving journey, to stay the least.

Soon Jack lost track of time. He tried to make a timeline, but it was hard. He and the others arrived at the mine late afternoon, and ran into the Decepticons about a couple of hours later. But how long was he unconscious? How long had he been wandering the collapsed tunnels? Was it night? It had to be a while.

Jack tried to stay focused, to find a way out of his predicament. But it was getting harder to think with each passing moment. His dark surroundings would close in on him and his head spun, enough that he would fall limp. Heavy numbness slowly replaced the pain. Jack began to wonder if lack of fresh oxygen or blood loss caused his weakened state. Probably both.

He found it harder and harder to keep his eyes open. His head fell several times, clanging against the hard metal. The teenager focused on his breathing, which turned from weak to shallow, unknowingly syncing it to Megatron’s long strides. The rhythmic motion swayed Jack back and forth. He was so tired.

The human closed his eyes and the world disappeared.

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Megatron noticed the human had ceased his struggles, glancing at his prisoner. The boy’s eyes were closed, and he wasn’t moving, save for the steady rising of his chest. Satisfied the prisoner had fallen into forced recharge, the massive Decepticon leader continued his journey to the surface.

The alien soil had a stale, unpleasant scent, like everything else on this planet. Sediment had formed a thick layer over his once pristine armor, and began to collect in clumps within his inner wiring. It made Megatron growl in annoyance, which in result made the human murmur in discontent.

Once again glancing down at his prize, the warlord attempted to see what the Autobots saw so special about their pets. A human was nothing like the mighty race. They were soft, fleshy, simple. They had no claws, no weapons, no natural means of defense. And they were so small. A Cybertronian could crush them. The humans were insects, nothing more.

Yet, this foolish boy thought of the two-wheeler as his partner. The idea was so absurd just the thought made Megatron scoff. A human and a Cybertronian could never be equals. If the Autobots truly thought otherwise, they were weaker than he originally thought. They would see the consequences of their decisions soon.

Megatron had not failed to notice the presence of the human pets during several of their confrontations. If the Autobots trusted their allies enough to bring them onto the battlefield, then the humans would be trusted enough with the location of their base.

Something Megatron needed, if he was to turn the war into his favor. He knew he already overpowered the Autobots—the Decepticons outnumbered and outmatched their enemies in more ways than one. So the Autobots had resorted to different tactics—hiding somewhere on this dirt planet, coming out of the shadows only if it suited them. Such cowardice.
It was only a matter of time before the Decepticons found them, and destroyed them.

If the organic could speed that along, then all the better.

Megatron came to a pause. Another dead end. The warlord snarled in frustration, tired of continuously running into the same obstacle. Enough of this. The Decepticon’s fusion cannon hummed to life, a violet hue filling the cavern. He took aim and fired.

The human started with a high-pitched sound at the resulting commotion, even trying to jump from his prison. Megatron merely held him tight until he fell limp again. His path now clear, the titan stepped forward.

Only to be greeted by a familiar figure.

“Master!” Starscream yelped in Cybertronian, flinching back.

Megatron’s optics narrowed. The Seeker looked no better than him—covered in dirt and dents. Apparently, he didn’t escape the cave-in, after all. Even though he abandoned his master.

Starscream’s E.M. fields were lit up alarm, but were quickly repressed and was instantly replaced by a mask of relief.

“You’re alive!” he squawked. “Thank the AllSpark!”

A dangerous growl came from Megatron’s chassis. He did not move from his spot, but he did not have to. Immediately Starscream noticed the Decepticon leader’s growing fury.

“I did not abandon you, master!” the treacherous second-in-command insisted. “I returned… to save you!”

“Save me?” Megatron echoed, doubtful. Wings drooped, but Starscream kept up his charade.

“Look into my spark, Lord Megatron… My intentions were true!”

“Yes…” A brief sense of relief came from Starscream, his wings even perking up, but it quickly vanished as Megatron said, “Your intentions were true… when you chose to cross me.”

It was then the Decepticon leader took a menacing step forward; Starscream hopped back.

“Please, my lord!” the Seeker begged. “Have mercy!”

“Tell me why I should allow you to live,” Megatron snarled, taking powerful steps forward, making Starscream taking several steps back. The warlord continued, his voice getter harsher and higher with each word. “why should I tolerate someone whose every waking impulse has been to thwart me, undercut me, overthrow me?!”

“Not true! I have always put your wellbeing before my own!”

“You left me at the mercy of the Autobots. You removed the dark energon from my spark, attempting to terminate me, and how did that constitute attending to my wellbeing?”

By now Megatron had cornered Starscream into the corner of the cavern. Although Starscream was not a small Decepticon, Megatron’s larger size was able to block off any hope of escape. The second-in-command was hunching over again, trying to make himself as small as possible. Before it was amusing, but now the pathetic display disgusted Megatron.

The warlord was willing to accept death from a human (although, he doubted the soft-hearted
creature would actually commit, and he was right), and the former Sky Commander was groveling.

“I-I was simply trying help,” Starscream stammered. “By ridding you of the dark matter polluting your body.”

“Yet you had no qualms using it for yourself. And when that wasn’t enough, you attempted to horde a stockpile of energon.”

“My lord—” The coward stuttered for an excuse, until he was distracted by the particular object in Megatron’s servo. “…How did you acquire a human?”

Megatron grew tired of his shrill voice. “Shut up!”

With that, the Decepticon leader landed a vicious blow to the traitor’s head with enough force to send him literally flying. Starscream lived up to his name as he crashed into adjacent wall, sending a cloud of debris into the air. There was a lingering silence as Megatron stalked nearer, doubting his second was that weak. Sure enough, there was a flicker of movement, followed by a familiar growl.

“So… that’s how it is,” Starscream snarled as he stepped out of the dust, long claws fully extended and wings bristling.

Megatron narrowed his optics dangerously, but had no chance to reply. In a movement too fast to follow, the Seeker cocked a missile into position and sent it in the warlord’s direction with a high-pitched whistle. Mindful of the frail being in his grasp, Megatron held the human to his chassis and turned, protecting the boy from the worst of the impact of Starscream’s attack. It burned and unleashed enough force to make the warlord stumble, but it struck thick armor. Not enough to cripple. Starscream foolishly thought otherwise, believing he had made a chance to strike.

The Seeker burst forth, his talons outstretched with a devious smirk. He pounced on Megatron’s shoulder, digging deep grooves into the sterling armor. Megatron merely snarled in annoyance and swatted the pest away. This time Starscream landed on his feet.

“This time, I’ll make sure you’re offline!” the treacherous lieutenant vowed.

The mere words made Megatron bark with laughter. “You, destroy me? And you actually believe you can lead the Decepticons!”

The Seeker lunged, but Megatron was faster. The Decepticon leader brought his cannon to life, firing to properly finish the execution. Starscream skillfully dodged the attack, and the ones after. Megatron snarled and Starscream laughed.

“What’s wrong?” the nuisance taunted. “You—”

Whatever insult was on the snake’s tongue vanished when a blast of dark energon slammed into him. He let out a choked scream and he skidded across the floor with the sharp sound of grinding metal.

This time Starscream didn’t leap back up to his feet, allowing Megatron to near at a leisurely pace. He unsheathed his sword. The second-in-command’s chassis was scorched, but he was still alive. The dark energon must have invaded his systems, because he was slow to move. He lifted his body only to be greeted with the tip of Megatron’s sword between his optics. Starscream froze with a gasp.

Megatron had no interest in last words. He wanted this whole affair over with. The Decepticon leader pulled his arm back, braced to deliver the killing blow.

For the second time that day, he was interrupted.
The heavy pedes on stone was the only warning he received before there was a furious yell. Falling back to his days in the Pits, the former gladiator leaned back just in time to avoid an energon blast. Megatron spun on his heels, fusion cannon at ready.

It was the Wrecker this time, with his human pet.

The girl let out a shriek—in fright or delight—the Decepticon truly wasn’t certain. Instead, his attention went to the green Autobot, who had his cannon trained on the warlord.

“Miko, get back!” Bulkhead ordered, speaking in that crude human language. The Autobot stepped forward, forming a gigantic wall between the warlord and the girl. “You’re scrap, Buckethead!”

“If that is the case,” Megatron rumbled mockingly, “I hope you don’t mind scrapping your pet as well.”

“What are you talking about?”

A victorious grin on his lips, the Decepticon brought up his unconscious prisoner, holding the fleshling by just his arms. His head hung loosely, and his crimson blood still dripped from his leg. This time the organic femme’s scream was one of fear.

“Jack!” she wailed, bringing her hands to her face.

Jack. So that was his name.

“Let go of him!” Bulkhead demanded furiously.

Megatron had no chance to reply, as Starscream recovered from his dazed state. The Seeker scrambled to his feet, cocking a missile on his arm into place. The warlord heard the distinctive click too late and the following whoosh. The projectile struck Megatron’s back.

The force of the impact was enough to send Megatron crashing face-first into the ground with a grunt. He was able to break the worst of the fall with a fist; the human still secured in the other. Instead of taking the opportunity to attack the downed warlord, Starscream sprinted down the tunnel in the opposite direction. Coward.

“You will not escape me, Starscream!” Megatron bellowed, rising into a crouch and turning his fusion cannon to the deserter.

Before he had a chance to fire, a powerful blast of energon landed on his arm, throwing him off balance. Megatron turned to see the Wrecker charging at him at full speed.

“Give back the kid!” the Autobot ordered.

“You want him?” Megatron replied, taunting. “Then take him!”

Leaving it to fate, the Decepticon leader tossed the human boy up into the air. For a moment, he seemed suspended in midair, limbs spread as if he was braced to catch himself. The girl screamed again, followed by the sharp screeching of metal on stone. Megatron grinned wickedly as the Wrecker skidded to a halt, his attention completely diverted to the boy, servos spread out to catch him. How predictable.

Having no time to charge his cannon, the Decepticon curled his claws into a fist and sent a powerful uppercut into Bulkhead’s chassis, right underneath the thick armor protecting the spark chamber. Despite the Autobot’s heavy weight, the sheer power of the blow was enough to send him back with
a pained yell. There was a heavy thunderclap of impact, followed by a static-filled groan.

“*Bulkhead!*” the girl screamed.

Megatron was tempted to stomp her, if it meant silencing her persistent screeching. Instead, he focused on another tiny figure. With sharp reflexes, ex-gladiator lunged forward, extending an open palm. The boy, Jack, roughly landed in his servo just before impacting with the solid ground. There was a heavy thud, but Megatron saw no damage done to his prisoner.

The Decepticon looked over to see Bulkhead flat on his back, groaning. The human pet was chirping for his attention, running over to stand next to his audial receptor and was yelling in her high-pitched voice. Megatron didn’t know how, but apparently it was enough to encourage the Autobot to get back to his feet. It was a slow process, but Megatron waited patiently.

“Not another step, Wrecker,” the Decepticon leader ordered. “We wouldn’t want anything *unfortunate* to happen to the boy.”

“Let Jack go, you jerk!” the girl yelled up at him. “Or mine’s the face you never forget! *Never!*”

Megatron glared down at the insect with an indignant look.

“You heard her,” Bulkhead growled. “Hand him over!”

The Decepticon warlord barked out a laugh. “And why would I possibly to *that*, Wrecker?”

Bulkhead’s optics narrowed and his cannon hummed, but did not charge enough to fire. “Like you would spare a human.”

Megatron grinned, flashing denta. “The least I can do. After all, he spared *mine.*”

The look of disbelieving shock on the Autobot and his pet’s faces greatly amused the dictator.

“What?!” the green Autobot exclaimed. “You expect us to take a word of a Decepticon?”

“No way!” Miko rejected. “Like Jack would stick up for someone like *you*!”

“Do with it as you will,” Megatron merely replied. “Rest assured, I have no intention terminating your little pet. Not yet, at least.”

“What do you mean ‘yet’?!” Miko cried.

“*Jack*’ is coming with me, and he will have a great deal to offer to the Decepticon cause.”

The Wrecker’s gaze was murderous, fields flaring with rage, then the Autobot glanced at something over Megatron’s shoulder.

“Not if *we* can help it, Buckethead,” Bulkhead proclaimed triumphantly.

Megatron didn’t have a chance to replay as there was a furious battle cry. Something small but solid slammed into the warlord’s back, something sharp slicing into his armor. He viciously snarled and reached over his shoulder to snatch the nuisance, only for the thing to flip over his helm. A servo reached out, for the boy.

The silver titan possessively closed his talons around his captive and put his fist to his chassis. There was a hiss of frustration and his assailanter flipped away, landing by the Wrecker’s side.
This time it was the cerulean two-wheeler, Arcee.

She was only a couple feet taller than a human, making her one of the smallest Cybertronians Megatron had ever met, but he was well aware she was not to be underestimated. What she lacked in size, she made up in speed and agility. She was already in a battle stance, her twin blasters leveled, and her winglets raised high. Her optics were narrowed, and her faceplates were twisted in a snarl.

Instead of focusing her glare on the warlord, Arcee’s optics never left the servo that held the human —her pet. It amazed Megatron, that all it took was an insect to rile her up. Bulkhead took a step forward, stomping on the ground with a deafening clang.

“If you think we’re gonna let you walk away with him, you gotta another thing comin’!” Bulkhead snapped.

“Who said anything about walking?”

Megatron grinned in amusement at the surprise and horror in the Autobots’ frames. Securing the boy within the plates of his armor, the Decepticon transformed into a Cybertronian flyer with a series of clanking sounds. The room in the tunnels was limited, but it was just enough.

“Miko!” Bulkhead suddenly screamed. “Cover your ears!”

Megatron didn’t see if the pet followed his orders, because he shot away with an explosion of sound. He ignored the angry shouts and curses that followed him.

The tunnels were by no means favorable flight conditions. Several times his wings clipped the earthen walls, but not violently enough to send him spiraling. He was forced to go slower than he would have liked, as there were too many turns to take. Megatron’s patience was just about to wear thin, when suddenly a bright, fiery light appeared across his vision.

Coming from a gap in the earth, just large enough for Starscream to crawl through.

The scheming second-in-command was good for something, after all.

Not bothering to switch back to bipedal form, Megatron shot forward with a burst of speed. He was bigger than the crevice, so his wings collided with the surrounding rock in a jarring impact. He forced his way through, sending a tower of debris high into the air. Megatron flew straight through it until he hovered above the mine.

The fiery light of the morning sun illuminated the landscape, turning the land into bright colors of green and red and yellow. The mountain air was thin and crisp through his ventilations. Megatron was oddly never so relieved to see the sky—even an alien one—which was aflame with brilliant shades. However, he did not waste time to rejoice.

He had a deserter to catch.

Uncaring to the fact the ground was still far below him, the Decepticon leader transformed back to his bipedal mode. Instantly the planet’s weak gravity captured him, sending him back down at a frightening speed. He landed nimbly on his pedes, but his heavy weight collided with the ground with such momentum it cracked the very earth with a horrible quiver.

There was an uncomfortable moan from his servo, but Megatron opted to ignore it. Instead, he quickly scanned the area. It was completely barren around the mine’s entrance, from when his Decepticons cleared all the trees and debris for the operation. Megatron noticed something else was missing.
No Starscream.

Megatron snarled viciously when he realized. He glanced up and sure enough, he saw the Seeker, disguised as a human flyer, soaring away at a supersonic speed. He flew directly towards the sun, as if its harsh light could hide his distinguishable form.

The great monster bared in fangs in rage. Starscream’s freedom would be short-lived. It was a mistake to allow the treacherous snake to live—a mistake, Megatron did not intend to make again. He would find the traitor, and he would terminate the fiend.

There was another moan, louder than the first, interrupting the Decepticon’s malicious thoughts. Megatron glanced down and opened his servo to see the boy was stirring again. His optics—or eyes, in their language—fluttered and he mumbled incoherent words. Megatron noticed the color of his—what was it called? Skin?—had become a lighter shade, and was shiny from some sort of layer of coolant. The creature’s strange blood had stopped leaking, but both the boy’s coverings and the Decepticon’s servo was stained red.

“Megatron!” a fierce voice roared, interrupting his observations.

The Decepticon glanced over his shoulder, noticing he had been followed. Arcee’s twin blasters were aimed for his helm. She was a persistent one.


“And lose a valuable source of information? I think not. And besides,” Megatron added as he squeezed the little thing once again, provoking another high-pitched whimper, “I like how he squeals.”

The cruel taunt had a predictable effect.

With a furious screech, Arcee charged forward.

It was then that Jack woke up.

Jack didn’t know what happened after he passed out. His surroundings came and went, changing between dark shapes and inky blackness. No thoughts went through his mind, lost in a fog he could not clear. He only felt violent lurches and he heard explosive noises. The rest of his senses were muted, like he was suspended in water.

Then all too suddenly the world returned, this time with harsh, burning light.

It burst through Jack’s eyelids, straining his retinas. He murmured in discontent and tried to force them open, only for his head to explode in a splitting headache. Then a strange sensation captured Jack’s entire body. He felt all his organs jump to his throat and a sharp sound was in his ear. A ruthless lurch unlike any other shook his limited sense of reality.

Jack wailed at the unpleasant rattling of his bones. Cold walls closed around him.

The intense pain in his head radiated across his body, pulsing through his muscles. He could feel the agony in his bones. He wailed again, wanting it all to stop.

There was a noise. It was so familiar and so foreign at the same time.

Arcee?

Jack opened his eyes. He saw a large mass above him, outlined by reddish hues.

Then the walls returned, but instead of blocking him from the outside world, they pressed against his sides. The agony intensified so much and so quickly that the boy let out a pitiful scream.

Make it stop!

There was a harsh sound.

Jack turned his head at the noise, looking through the bars of his metal cage to see a guardian.

“Arr-cee?” the boy slurred under his breath.

His heart sped up at the sight of his partner. She was battered and dirty from the cave-in, but there were no signs of major damage. In fact, she was as fast as ever, as she lunged forward as if to clear the distance between them.

“Jack!”

“Arcee!”

The cobalt femme had her servo reached out, as if to take his hand. Jack moved to rush forward, to meet her halfway.

Then the ground disappeared.
The first thing Jack felt was pain. It coursed through his body in agonizing waves, from his head to his toes. His head pounded, the migraine so intense that his ears rung. His right leg throbbed and burned.

Then the boy felt the cold. It penetrated his long sleeves and prickled his skin, making his hair stand on end. The boy’s eyes fluttered. He tried to keep them open, but they would close on their own accord. Black shapes passed over his vision, but they were too blurry for him to identify. Everything was so dark. Strange sounds reached his ears, oddly distorted and muffled, but still clear.

It took almost a full minute for Jack to recognize the sounds. A series of high-pitched whirrs and beeps, somehow coming together to form words—words that no human could ever hope to replicate.

Cybertronian.

The teenager was confused. The Autobots rarely spoke their native language—at least, while the kids were around. When the humans were in earshot, they made an effort to speak in English, even to each other. However, Jack had noticed a few times the extra-terrestrials slipped back into Cybertronian whenever they conversed off to the side. But if they knew he was here, why weren’t they speaking English?

Jack opened his eyes, squinting at his dark surroundings. More confusion. The Autobots always left the fluorescent lights of the military base on. They did not require them to see, but they had no reason to turn them off, either. In the darkness, the walls looked—

Jack’s heart stopped.

Black.

With a start, the human attempted to jump into a sitting position. He was only rewarded with a shock of white, hot pain up his spine, and he merely flailed. Jack grinded his teeth together. His limbs were heavy with soreness. He instinctively slipped an arm to hold him up, but it trembled with effort. What… what happened to him?

The boy quickly looked around, trying to see in all directions at once. He was surrounded by dark walls, made up of a material the human could not name, that were poorly lit in an alien light. Walls that he had seen before, and wished he would never see again. Immediately his heart quickened, and his breath shortened. The teenager looked around again, trying to find an assurance, a flaw in his surroundings, that told him that all of this wasn’t real. That this was just a bad dream.

Jack was only rewarded with tall metal tables, filled with deadly-looking tools, their function obscure. Like he was in some kind of—

Laboratory.

On the Nemesis, the Decepticon warship.

Panic rushed up from his chest so fast that Jack’s head spun. He swayed with a moan, almost falling back down. His head hung loosely.

Loud slams reached Jack’s ears, each one sounding like two dump trucks crashing into each other. Before the teenager could figure out what it was, a high-pitched, deafening screech assaulted his
hearing, coming from all around him. The awful sound sent unnerving shivers down his spine as the boy let out a startled yell.

“Wakey, wakey, fleshy,” a taunting drawl greeted. It was strangely muffled, coming from somewhere above him, but Jack still recognized that voice.

“Knock Out,” the human spat, like a curse.

He glanced up to see crimson Decepticon standing above him, a self-satisfied look on his silvery-white faceplates as he pulled his claws away. It was then Jack realized something was wrong. He could see Knock Out clearly, yet the Decepticon’s features were distorted—faded and skewed, as if he was looking through—

Glass.

Translucent, solid walls surrounded Jack. Apparently the ‘Cons decided to put him a cell, or rather, a glass pod just big enough to contain a single human.

“I guess this is the luxury suite, huh?” Jack snapped, his voice filled with venomous sarcasm. Though Cybertronians had difficulty understanding human humor, Knock Out seemed to know enough to pick up on the dry tone.

“If it’s not to your liking, then we would love to give you an upgrade,” the medic replied, his tone replicating the human’s.

Jack opened his mouth to retort, only for a dark shadow to silence him. The boy looked up, and his throat tightened. It was Megatron, free from his prison and at his full height. Jack glared, but he doubted he looked threatening due to the ridiculous size difference between them. No sentient being should be allowed to be as big as Megatron.

“Comfortable?” the Decepticon leader asked, mocking.

“Been better,” Jack retorted with venom.

The silver tyrant merely snorted in contempt before turning to Knock Out. He said something in Cybertonian. The medic nodded obediently and twisted the metal top of Jack’s enclosure. It opened with a hiss and Jack braced to fight off the metal hand that would come for him. Instead, the world lurched.

The human let out a yelp as he slid down the glass without permission—right into Knock Out’s servo. Instantly the Decepticon’s claws curled around his torso, holding him tight. The medic was significantly smaller than his master—his servo only big enough to wrap around the human’s upper body, meaning Jack’s limbs were free. He took advantage of it to struggle, wriggling in his captor’s grip as he flailed his limbs.

“Quit it,” Knock Out snarled, and tightened his grip, scolding.

The pain flared. White flashed across Jack’s vision. He cried out.

“This will go smoother if you do not resist,” Megatron rumbled as Jack panted, trying to regain his bearings.

The boy couldn’t reply, not while there wasn’t any air in his lungs. His surroundings panned violently. Knock Out’s grip loosened and disappeared altogether. Jack’s organs shifted uncomfortably as he fell through the air, crashing on the metal table. He wheezed as his shoulder
took most of the impact, rolling over to grip it with gritted teeth.

Suddenly something hard poked his side, rolling him to his back. The human looked up to see Knock Out above him, analyzing optics disturbingly close. Jack yelped and slid backwards, using his hands and elbows. Only to ram into a wall.

His gut twisted when he realized it wasn’t a wall.

Megatron’s servo.

“Stay still,” the Decepticon leader ordered.

Seeing the sharp claws in his corner of his vision, curled in anticipation, Jack froze. Knock Out took advantage of the situation to near again. The human leaned away, pressing his back against Megatron’s palm.

Knock Out’s ruby optics spiraled and flared, like lenses trying to focus. Making a metallic hum, the medic brought up his forearm. It shifted and suddenly a light encased Jack. The boy squinted at the brilliance of it.

Jack felt *something*, a slight buzzing in his bones, but it wasn’t painful. The light disappeared, and Knock Out made that strange noise again.

“Scans show no signs of critical damage,” the medic reported. “It seems his injuries are merely superficial.”

It didn’t *feel* superficial. His muscles ached to the bone. Jack winced as the Decepticon tapped his leg with a claw, right next to the cut on his foreleg. It went from a little above his ankle reaching up to the back of his calf. Dried, black blood sealed the worst of the wound, but the skin around it was an angry red. He could see a sickly yellow tint in wet scabs over the cut. Infection.

Knock Out may had been a medic, but he treated robotic organisms from another planet. He knew next to nothing about human anatomy. What looked like a “superficial” injury, could prove much worse. However, Megatron didn’t seem to have in interest beyond Knock Out’s assurance. The warlord spoke in Cybertronian to his subordinate, and the medic chattered back.

Jack’s stomach knotted. The alien sounds alone were unnerving, but not knowing their meaning sent prickles of fear up and down the boy’s spine. Especially since he knew they were talking about him.

“What are you talking about?” the teenager dared to ask.

“Quiet,” Megatron snapped in English, as if annoyed at being interrupted.

Jack couldn’t help but flinch as the harsh sound. He waited anxiously as the Decepticons finished their conversation. Still, it startled him with a start when Knock Out suddenly switched to his language.

“Sit up,” the medic ordered.

Realizing he was in no position to protest, Jack reluctantly obeyed. He leaned forward into a sitting position, but made no attempt to stand up. He couldn’t even if he wanted to. The prisoner winced as Knock Out poked him with a sharp claw, turning his body this way and that. The Decepticon let out a noise of distaste.

“Pity you humans have no medical port,” he complained. A medical what? Suddenly Knock Out’s
expression went from disappointment to satisfaction. “Fine, I’ll just make one.”

The claw settled on the top of Jack’s head, pushing down with painful pressure, exposing the back of his neck. He whined, expecting his neck to break at the force. Instead, he watched Knock Out pull a cable from his wrist. Before Jack could say anything, the Decepticon jammed the end of the line into the human’s spine.

Jack let out a harsh cry as sharp agony invaded his spine, pulsing all the way down his back. The pounding of his skull intensified and white flashed across his vision. His body spasmed as electric pain coursed through his muscles. He couldn’t move. He couldn’t hear. He couldn’t see.

Jack screamed.

Knock Out broke the connection.

Immediately the human fell limp, collapsing on the metal surface with a greedy gasp of air. Agony washed over his body, making him tremble in exhaustion. Bile rose to his throat. He heard sounds above him, but the intense ringing in his ears made it impossible to decipher what it was.

Suddenly something warm surrounded Jack and he felt his body move without his permission. He shut his eyes tighter. Not again! Something solid and warm stroked his back. The boy keened.

“Hush now,” Megatron’s raspy voice cooed.

He stroked the dull side of his claw against Jack’s back, as if in comfort. The boy was too weak to protest the petting.

“Breakdown!” Knock Out suddenly called.

The heavy sounds of pedes on metal came, prompting Jack to crack an eye open. He was greeted with the bulky Decepticon, his silver and blue paint dull underneath the dim lighting. Jack purposefully ignored the Cybertronians’ conversation, until suddenly he was switched to Breakdown’s hold. He did not resist in the medical assistant’s cupped servos.

Breakdown carried him to a desk covered with bright screens, glyphs scrawling over them. Some kind of computer, Jack realized. The Decepticon placed him down on the cold metal surface next to the screens. The human glanced up, only to see Breakdown replaced by Knock Out.

The cable reappeared in the boy’s vision.

“No!” he cried, his body in jolting in panic.

Knock Out’s servo reached for him, only for the boy to scramble out of his hold. The medic growled and it spurred Jack to his feet. He lunged forward, only for his knees to buckle. His head spun. Suddenly fiery pain shot up from his injured leg. Jack cried and collapsed back onto the ground.

Knockout made a clicking noise at the spectacle.

“Running isn’t going to help you now,” the Decepticon drawled.

He reattached the cable, and Jack screamed as his body convulsed. It was as bad as the first time, as all of his senses were robbed, except for the intense pain that invaded his muscles. Jack didn’t know how long it took for his white vision to be replaced by shapes. Distorted, discolored shapes.

Something bright above him, making alien sounds as it hit a board above him. A bulk standing in the
corner of the space, as if bored or expectant. A larger, darker shape, crossing his vision to lay on a smooth surface. High-pitched noises, too strange and too foreign to understand.

Jack closed his eyes.

The world disappeared.

Show me the Autobot base.

The Autobot base. It was actually a United States military base. Well, an ex-military base. According the William Fowler, the government’s military liaison with the Autobots, it was built during the Cold War, after the initial nuclear weapons testing. After the USSR came out with their own tests, missile silos popped up all over the United States. They were active, waiting for the order from the president himself, that the day of nuclear war had finally come.

It wasn’t until Gorbachev and Reagan signed the INF Treaty, agreeing to dismantle their nuclear arsenals, that those days ended. No longer needed, the military silo shut down, and hadn’t been touched ever since.

Abandoned, far from civilization, and too large to make any practical use of.

The perfect place to hide the Autobots.

The military tried to upgrade the base, but they could only do so much with fifty-year-old technology. The Autobots were displeased, especially Ratchet, but they made do. It was certainly big enough to fit their large sizes. Most of the main corridors were a few stories tall and the silo itself was converted to the expansive main lobby. Human-sized rooms that once held the offices and the barracks were converted into storage.

All the while, the people of Jasper, Nevada were none the wiser that—

Jack reeled. What? What was going on?

Show me the Autobot base.

He remembered. He remembered the first day Arcee took him there. He didn’t even want to go, didn’t want to get involved. And here he was, fighting an alien civil war—

Jack screamed. No! The Decepticons! They were looking for the Autobot base! He couldn’t let them know its location! He shut his eyes tight. He couldn’t let them win. He had to stop them.

He missed the ways things were. When there was no tragedy, no war, no pain. He missed the camping trips, the hikes, the rallies, the football games. Everything his father took him to, just the two of them. Where they talked about anything, where they could make up months or years of lost time in just a matter of hours.

Before—

Show me the Autobot base.

He missed Dad.

What’s happening?

Hmm... The human seems to be rejecting the patch, my liege.
Impossible.

May I suggest we permit the human to continue? Although his mind is primitive, his memories may shed some valuable intel.

Very well.

Jack didn’t know what was happening. Mom was crying. Dad wasn’t home. The phone had been ringing all day, and every time Mom answered it, she would break up in hysterics. Something about a plane. Something that “he” was missing.

Dad? Was it Dad? Did something happen to him? Was that why he wasn’t home?

There were tears in his eyes and the six-year-old boy couldn’t help his high-pitched voice as he dared to ask his mother where was Dad. Immediately her tears stopped, and her lips were pressed in a tight line. Her voice was strained.

“Daddy will be home soon, Jack,” she promised.

Relief washed over the boy. Dad was okay. Everything was okay. But why was Mom crying? He went into her room. He could make her better! They could watch his favorite cartoon, and they would laugh! They’ll play a board game when Dad came home! Only when Jack tried to scramble onto her bed, she let out a snap, harsher than he was used to.

“Go back to your room, Jack,” she ordered.

What? Why? What did he do wrong? Was he bad?

“But—” he started, but she cut him off.

“Now.” But she was crying! Why? Was it the TV? Maybe the show was scary. It looked scary.

Towers were burning.

Dad came home hours after Jack’s bedtime. Mom thought her son was asleep, but he was wide awake. He hid his head under the covers, not moving when she came to check up on him. He waited until there was a growl and the wall vibrated as the garage door opened. There was a quiet slam and the heavy footsteps of his father’s boots walked by his room.

His heart quickened.

Mom and Dad thought he was asleep.

They didn’t think to look in his room’s direction as he silently cracked the door open. Just big enough for an eye and an ear.

Dad looked like he was sick. His head hung low and he collapsed on the chair with a tired thud. Mom was pacing around him.

“Did you hear anything?” she demanded. “Did they tell you anything?”

Dad was silent for a long time.

“The Pentagon was hit pretty bad,” he finally forced out. It sounded like he was crying. Dad never cried. “Casualties are still coming in. T-they say there’s—ugh.” The man made a strange sound. “They’re expecting it to be in the thousands.”
Mom’s hands went to her face and her eyes went wide. “Oh, my God…”

There was a silence, longer than the first.

“He’s dead, June.” Mom made no reply. She was frozen in that shocked posture, watching as Dad folded in on himself. “My brother’s dead.”

Johnathan Darby sobbed.

Jack didn’t understand. Why was his father leaving? Why did he have to leave?

Mom was crying. Jack was crying. Dad was crying. But it was only the son that shed any tears as the last bag was thrown into the car.

“Why do you have to go?” Jack asked in a low whine.

Mom showed no tears, nor did Dad as he knelt in front of his son.

“There’s some very bad people we have to find,” he said patiently.

Even little Jack knew it was more complicated than that. But his parents wouldn’t tell him, not when he was only seven-years-old. Later, then, when he was older. But maybe even then, he still wouldn’t understand.

“I’ll come back,” Dad went on, firmly, assuring. “But until then, you have to take care of your mother. You’re the man of the house, now.”

Jack only nodded. He had to be brave, like Dad.

“Soldiers don’t cry,” the boy remembered, pushing down a sob.

“Sure, we do,” Dad argued calmly.

Jack couldn’t help it. He lunged forward, wrapped his small arms around his father’s thick neck. The man instinctively returned the gesture with one of his bear hugs.

“I love you, son.”

His name was Jack Darby. He was the son of June Darby, a nurse, and Johnathan Darby, a United States Army Ranger. He was a military brat.

He spent his entire life on an Army base. His family was military. His neighbors were military. His friends were brats just like him. He knew everything there was to know, even naming the rifles and vehicles that passed through the base on a daily basis.

He lived on a military base, but not just one. His family moved from one side of the States to another, never staying in a house for more than a few years. Fort Stewart. Fort Benning. Fort Belvoir.

Jack spent his childhood in Georgia. There was always something to do. Dad would take him to the national parks, where they would camp there on the weekends. Sometimes they would take a two-hour trip to Jacksonville, Florida, to visit the father’s Navy friends at the Naval Station of Mayport. Or to see the air show the port hosted every year. As a family, they would go to the beach, much closer to home. Sometimes Mom would take him, when she wanted peace and quiet. When his parents would be preoccupied, he and his friends would build forts in the woods. They always found ways to cause mischief. It didn’t last long, though.
Next was Washington, moving from the East coast to the West. It was the shortest stay, and the most miserable. In the summer, it was always raining. In the winter, it was always snowing. It was always cold. Jack didn’t like it, so used to the warm sun. Dad loved it. He would try to cheer the boy up by taking him hiking and rock-climbing. That always seemed to work. He loved the scenic view of the mountains.

They were in Virginia for the longest. It was an hour drive to get to Washington D.C., but they made it work. Jack went to school there. Mom was a nurse for the military, so she worked at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. They made do with their situation, and for the first time in Jack’s life, he dared to call it home.

He learned every street in the District, learning how they crossed and knowing the location of every monument of the city. There was a lot. There seemed to be more tourist sites than anything else, and eventually Jack lost interest in the historic sites. It was hard not to. He saw them every day. But at the same time, they were what helped him map out the methodical, but maze-like streets.

He made a lot of friends in Washington D.C. Like most of the people he met in his life, they either came from a military or political family. There was a girl that was the daughter of a five-star general. His best friend was the nephew of the president.

While Jack and his mother were left to adjust to their new environment, Dad left to tour the world. Months to years at a time. It was always to somewhere different. Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Qatar. Dad always came back with the most surreal stories, and sometimes Mom would snap that Jack had no reason to hear them.

Dad always came back.

Thirteen-year-old Jack was going to be late for school. He had an algebra test today. He hated algebra. It made no sense him, strange symbols and numbers that came together in a foreign language. And there were numbers that didn’t exist, but yet he had to know them.

“Mom, have you seen my textbook?” he called upstairs.

“Did you try the kitchen?” she hollered back.

It was a best guess as any. Jack pivoted and headed that direction, only for the doorbell to stop him. He gave an impatient sigh and went to the front door.

Two solemn-faced servicemembers greeted him.

“Jack, who is it?” Mom asked as she came down the stairs, putting her raven-black hair into a ponytail.

She froze when she noticed the strangers.

Jack didn’t understand. Why? Why, why, why?!

The question repeated in his mind over and over and over. But he would never have an answer. Tears spilled from his eyes, even as he furiously wiped them away.

Soldiers don’t cry.

He told that to himself, even as the heart-wrenching cries of his mother came from the other room. The chaplain did his best to console her, but there was so much he could do for a grieving wife.
Johnathan Darby wasn’t coming home.

Jack keened. He wanted it to stop. He didn’t want to see this anymore. He wanted to be with his friends. The Autobots. He wanted Arcee.

But the presence pressed against him, wanting something for itself.

The servicemembers were distracted by his mother, so Jack had the opportunity to escape to his room. He ignored the dark presence in the corner, watching.

He collapsed onto a chair, much like he had seen his father do all those years ago.

Jack cried.

He let the tears fall, but stifled his sobs. Soldiers don’t cry.

“Interesting.”

Jack jumped a mile at the deep, menacing voice.

He spun around. There, next to his dresser, was Megatron.

“What are you doing here?” Jack snarled, getting as much distance between them.

The Decepticon leader ignored him as he scanned his crimson optics over the boy’s childhood home, as if in interest.

“I never expected you to be a warrior’s son,” Megatron went on. “Is that why your Arcee values you?”

“What are—” Wait. Megatron was here. In his room, from three years ago. How is that— Jack realized. He reared back, roaring, “Get out of my head!”

The sharp-toothed demon grinned. “Cortical psychic patch. Quite a useful tool, especially for interrogation. Knock Out had to make some… modifications in order for our minds to connect, but you are lasting longer than I anticipated.” He made a rumbling hum and added, "Humans. Resilient."

“You have no right—”

“Oh, I don’t? And why is that?”

These memories were his. They were his alone. Not the Autobots, not Miko, not Raf, and not even his mother knew what he saw and heard. And not Megatron. Megatron would not know his true thoughts. The warlord would not steal his emotions and twist them to his own ends.

“And who are you to stop me?” Megatron challenged.

Jack grinded his teeth. “GET OUT!”

Without warning, the Decepticon moved forward. Jack moved back, defensively. Braced to run or fight, whichever came first. But the color drained from his face as his back pressed against the wall.
Megatron kept advancing, his broad form looming over the young boy.

Jack roared again and threw a punch. The former gladiator caught his fist, easily. The boy cringed with a growl as the dictator forced his limb into unnatural angle. Claws caught Jack’s chin, tilting his gaze to meet blood-red optics.

“Show me,” Megatron ordered in a low, barely audible, hiss of a whisper.

The memories flooded over Jack.

It was Mom’s idea to move to Jasper, Nevada. It was where she was raised and met Dad; where they married and went into the military life together. Her parents didn’t appreciate her decision, so Jack didn’t see them much, but they loved their only daughter all the same.

June Darby used the inheritance money—and the check from the Army—to buy a modest, one-story home in the suburbs of the small desert town. She had some friends in the local hospital, mainly Dr. Debiase, who was able to get her an opportunity as a nurse in the emergency room.

Jasper was boring. It was the complete opposite of the bustling life Jack was used to. There was only a single highway that went through the town, surrounded by sun-bleached, half-paved roads and run-down buildings. Everybody knew everybody, but knew no one outside of the city borders. Everyone was born and raised in the same building as their grandparents, with no hurry to go anywhere.

Jack didn’t like it. Especially when he walked into the only school in the county, and he stuck out like a sore thumb. The new kid. The city boy. The military brat.

He was given a lot of labels—none of them creative—each one delivered with a leer. Jack tried to be quiet, mind his own business. He even got a job at one of the two fast food joints in the town, Knock Out Burgers.

WHAT?!

Be quiet.

Usually it was easy for Jack to get along with new people. But for some reason it was hard. Before, he always had a common interest with someone to start up a conversation, and later a friendship. He had nothing in common with the kids of Jasper High. They asked too many questions the teenager felt uncomfortable answering, and he cut off the conversation whenever his father was mentioned.

Somehow, he got the attention of Vince and his posy. They would jab and sneer at him at school, and they would go out of their way to pay him a visit at work. Which usually involved them ordering food, only to take off before he had to chance to ring up the bill. The rest of the school learned to ignore him. He only made a couple friends, but they were nice enough.

Jack couldn’t bring himself to be more outward than that. He fumbled for words whenever he ran into Sierra, the beautiful, kind, popular girl in school that everybody in town seemed to love. His lonely reign as the new kid ended when that Japanese exchange student, Miko Nakadai, came, but once again, the boy found no common ground between them. He definitely didn’t have anything in common with that math whiz, Rafael Esquivel.

Jasper was boring.

Then the motorcycle showed up.
The world returned with a piercing ring.

Jack gasped as his crippling headache. The boy rolled onto all fours, trembling. He moved to sit up, only for the world to lurch. He fell back down as his dark surroundings spun. Bile rose to his throat and he gagged at the acidic taste. He heaved, but nothing came up. When was the last time he ate?

Suddenly a pair of servos plucked the boy into the air. Jack closed his eyes, wishing the world would disappear.

Megatron was never fond of the cortical psychic patch, even though he relished its usefulness. The connection itself was unnerving, and the brush of another’s coding always felt odd. To make it worse, the procedure required the patient to go into induced recharge, and to be monitored by a third party. Megatron despised putting his well-being in another’s hands, especially if it was someone lesser than him. He was a Champion of the Pits of Kaon, not an experiment.

At least Knock Out was a competent medic. Most of the time. The Decepticon was even able to modify the patch, which wasn’t even his own invention, to allow a Cybertronian to connect with a human.

The cortical psychic patch was designed to force the walls around a Cybertronian’s processor to collapse, and gain nearly total access to that said Cybertonian’s coding—their thoughts and dreams. Only problem was that humans did not have a processor. Instead their brain used electricity to manipulate chemicals, which then affected the body. Knockout was able to adjust the machine to translate the changes in the human’s brain to coding, which then allowed a Cybertonian to read it.

Megatron felt the effects of the extra step. His processor was aggravated, and his inner circuitry was retarded. Being exposed to the mess of an organic’s mind did not help. Even when translated to his language, the human’s thoughts were so alien.

“What's wrong with it?” Breakdown’s voice broke through the Decepticon leader’s thoughts. He glanced over to see the Decepticon cradling the little creature in his servos. It—no, Jack—was unmoving.

“His stabilizing sensors must be miscalibrated,” Knock Out guessed. “Likely a side-effect of the procedure. After all, the cortical psychic patch was not meant for human minds.”

“Will he recover?” Megatron asked as he neared the pair.

“Why, of course, once his equilibrium has reestablished. However, I do not recommend we repeat the procedure for some time.”

Megatron did not like sound of that. Humans were slow and weak. “How long?”

“Considering human anatomy? Hard to tell. Whenever he regains homeostasis.”

Disappointing. The patch ended too abruptly, when Knock Out was forced to break the connection on the human’s behalf. Something about a “heart rate” getting too high. The medic’s interest in this world’s native species was useful for once. Even if it proved their fragility.

“Contact me when he is ready,” Megatron ordered. “We are close.”

The thundering steps of Megatron echoed throughout the room as he lumbered out of the lab.
"I have to pay for that!" Jack protested.

His dismayed cry fell on deaf ears as Vince sped off in his Dodge Charger, laughing hysterically. The sixteen-year-old boy sighed. Great. Another lecture from his uptight boss, and more money taken from his wallet. He heard a snicker behind him, and he felt heat in his cheeks. Why couldn't he have a break…

At least his manager didn't fire him for losing another meal, letting him end his shift with some dignity. A lot of the cars in the parking lot were as run down as the rest of Jasper—hand-me-down vehicles with peeling paint and rusted brakes.

But none of them were for him. Mom used the only car they had, in order to go to and from the hospital. Since she worked late hours, she couldn't pick him up at the end of his work day. It didn't matter, anyway, since she didn't trust him a driver's license. So the teenager was stuck with his plain bicycle he had since middle school.

Jack quickly pedaled off, prepared for the three-mile ride to his house, a given twenty minutes ride through the heart of town. Letting everyone see the pride of Jack Darby and his glorious bike.

There was so little traffic in Jasper, even during rush hour (or the time Jack considered rush hour, but the little town never heard of it). The sun was beginning to set, setting the sky ablaze with bright hues of crimson and violet. Jack looked up to enjoy the sight. It oddly reminded him of Washington, when—

There was a squeal of tires and Jack wheezed as something hard slammed into his side. He naturally went flying off his bike, or his bike went flying. He wasn't sure. He only remembered lying flat on his back on burning hot asphalt, staring at the brilliant sky far above him.

"Crap," a voice, a woman's, cursed. She said it in some lax form, because it sounded like she said "scrap." The voice went on, concerned and impatient at the same time. "Sorry! You okay, kid?"

Jack let out a groan. "Yeah…” His head hurt. "I think…”

There was a rumble of an engine and a burst of static, almost sounding like a sigh. The boy cautiously sat up, looking up at the strange noise. He was greeted with a sleek, street bike motorcycle. It was painted a flawless blue with silver touches. His bicycle lay next to it, as if the universe was mocking how unfair life was.

The motorcycle was gorgeous. After living in three major cities, that said a lot. It might take few K.O. paychecks, but he was going to own a ride like that someday. And he would be out of this backwater town.

The rider was in all black leather with blue lining, despite it was over 90 degrees Fahrenheit. She was obviously a woman, but the tinted visor of her helmet hid her face. Her head was facing in his direction, and even though he couldn't see her eyes, Jack felt the unnerving feeling of being watched.

"You should be more careful," the woman scolded. "I could have killed you."
That's a little extreme. Why did she sound so certain about that? Well, most adults sounded like that.

"S-sorry," Jack fumbled as he got to his feet. Then he did a double take. "Wait a sec. Why am I apologizing? You hit me!"

"You got in my way!"

"You're the driver! You're the one that supp—!"

His argument was cut off by a distant engine. Jack glanced down the road to see two deep purple cars pull onto the main drive. The style looked something akin to NASCAR vehicles, but something was off. They looked more... sinister.

The woman repeated her earlier curse.

Suddenly their brights turned on, the light harsh enough for Jack to wince and shield his eyes with an arm. The motorcyclist was unfazed as she furiously waved her hand.

"Get out of here," she snapped.

Engines revved, threateningly.

"What?" Jack retorted.

Suddenly the racecars surged forward with a squeal of tires.

"Run!" the woman screamed, flooring it herself.

The boy didn't have to be told twice. He spun on his heels and leaped out of the way, just as the dark cars sped by with a roar. Jack scrambled to his feet, watching at the motorcycle sped away, a racecar a few feet behind. He watched the other one skid into a 180, smoke coming from its tires. It charged towards him.

Jack cursed and took off, hearing the alien engine come closer and closer and—

He dived into a side alley, eating dirt for the—what, third time that day? The car went by with a frustrated growl, then there was a halt. The teenager instinctively ducked behind a dumpster, as if it was a great hiding place.

He watched the racecar slowly reverse, as if contemplating, before it turned into the alleyway. Any hope that the driver didn't seem him instantly vanished when the engine roared. The boy took off again, this time the racecar a few feet behind him. The daily bike rides were good for something, as Jack spurred himself to run faster and faster. Only for the car to come closer and closer, oblivious to the small obstacles in its way.

Suddenly a smaller engine joined the first.

Jack dared to look over his shoulder, watching as the blue motorcycle appeared, flying over the racecar. The motorcycle's rear tire slammed down onto the vehicle's windshield, shattering it, before effectively denting its hood. The car let out a pained squeal, slowing. The motorcyclist took advantage of it to speed in front of it, right for Jack.

The boy screamed the vehicle slammed into him, but instead of sending him to the ground once again, it slid underneath him. Suddenly he was on the saddle, gripping onto the handles for dear life, as it turned onto a street.
"Hold on," the woman ordered.

Wait, where was the driver?!

But that was her voice. It sounded it came from the—

"You can talk?" Jack yelped at the motorcycle.

"Not a good time to explain right now," the motorcycle snapped back.

The racecars appeared behind them, nearing. Suddenly barrels appeared on their sides. Were those guns?!
Jack's panicked question was answered when suddenly red-hot projectiles whizzed by his ear. He yelped, and the motorcycle went faster. It (or was it a she?) weaved, making it harder for their pursuers to get a clear shot. Jack just kept his head down.

They pulled onto the highway, almost slamming into a truck. The motorcycle avoided it and maneuvered through traffic way above the speed limit.

"Who were those guys?" Jack demanded. "Why are they shooting at us?"

"There's no 'us,' kid," the motorcycle retorted, "and those weren't just 'guys.' They think you're with me."

"But you hit me!"

Another staticky sigh. Suddenly there was an orchestra of car horns behind him and Jack glanced back. He watched with horror as cars were being shoved off the highway, slamming into the barriers and each other with sounds of screeching wheels, broken glass, and crunching metal. The racecars took the place of the cars they took out. The motorcycle seemed to notice, too.

"Arcee to base: I need back up. Be aware: civilian on sight."

"Who are you talking to?" Jack asked. "Friends of yours?"

"Family."

Suddenly the racecars caught up to them. His heart jumped to his throat as one settled on each side, effectively boxing the motorcycle in. They veered towards her and Jack shut his eyes, braced to become a talking-motorcycle sandwich. There was a screech of tires as the motorcycle braked, and the boy yelled as he lurched forward from the momentum. The cars slammed into each other with a shower of sparks.

Before they had time to straighten out, the motorcycle veered and floored it, successfully skirting around them. Their pursuers growled and surged forward again.

Then there was a distinct beep-like honking of a horn.

Jack glanced over his shoulder to see a yellow Chevrolet Camaro with black highlights appear behind the racecars. The muscle car slammed into the corner of one of the vehicles and swerved. The pit maneuver sent the car spiraling to a barrier, but it quickly recovered. Too quickly.

The Camaro tried to repeat the maneuver, but the second racecar anticipated the attack and avoided it. All the while, the recovered vehicle came up behind the yellow car. It tried to force its way by, only for the Camaro to stay in its front and slow down, forcing it back.
All the while, the first vehicle was speeding towards the motorcycle and Jack.

"Faster! Faster! Faster!" he yelled.

"Stop backseat driving!" the motorcycle snapped.

The road split up ahead, one fork continuing the highway and the other was the construction of the new highway that would go in the opposite direction. He realized with horror she was headed towards the blocked off road.

"No, wait! That's road closed!" he warned.

At the last second, the motorcycle pivoted with such force the teenager almost fell off. Only for the racecar to anticipate the move.

"Watch out!" Jack screamed.

His warning came too late. The evil car crashed into the motorcycle's front tire, sending her flipping over the hood. Jack screamed as the momentum from the high speed sent them tumbling down a ravine. The sky and dirt flipped back and forth like someone was playing with a light switch, until it stopped too suddenly.

Jack let out a wail as his shoulder slammed into solid concrete. His head hurt. His back hurt. Everything hurt. The poor boy groaned in agony.

"Oh, my gosh!" a small, yet familiar voice cried. A tiny face in Jack's vision. "Are you okay?!

"Ugh, no..." Jack winced.

It took him a second to realize it was the freshman boy in his pre-calculus class. What was his name again?

"Raf?" he ventured and the fourteen-year-old nodded vigorously.

"We need to get help!" Raf proclaimed.

"We need to get out of here," Jack wheezed as he slowly and painfully got to his feet. Raf pulled his arm and held him steady, despite being several inches shorter than the older boy. "These guys in weird cars are after—"

He was cut off as a pair of lights illuminated the boys along with the revving of an engine. Both of them froze and Jack glanced up to see the ominous vehicles at the crest of the hill, headlights trained on them like a predatory gaze.

"Oh, no! Here they come!" he yelped.

The cars raced down the hill, moving across the uneven terrain like it was nothing. They moved so fast Jack thought they were going to run over the boys, only something he could have never imagined happened.

There was a distinct sound of shifting gears and a metallic noise, and the shell of the cars shifted. Transforming into a giant robot.

Jack's jaw dropped. Raf gasped.
The pair of robots had to be ten feet tall. The metal—which looked like armor—was sleek and shiny under the dying sun, and it only made them more terrifying. They were covered in spike-like projections and their hands were clawed. They didn't have a face—only a blood-red line that made a thin visor. Jack gulped when he noticed their arms shift into a barrel-like shape of a cannon.

He backed away from the menacing monsters, only to hear the same distinct sound behind him. The talking motorcycle was now a robot, too. She was alike and different from the other robots. Her armor ended with the same sharp edges, but her figure was more slender and curved, like a woman's. She was only a couple feet taller than Jack and a couple feet shorter than the pair of robots, but she didn't seem fazed. Instead, she fixed the opponents with an ice-cold glare.

"This ends here, Decepticons," the she-robot growled. All hell broke loose.

Raf yelled and Jack dragged him out of the way as the robots charged for each other. There was an explosion of sound like two trains wrecking into each other, followed by just as ear-shattering screeches. The boys pressed themselves against the wall of the trough, watching the giant robot battle royale before them. It was the equivalent of watching a train wreck—awesome and terrifying at the same time.

The purple robots fired at the once-motorcycle robot, who dodged the projectiles with dizzying acrobatics. She used her speed and maneuverability against her opponents, skipping around their attacks to land a series of punches and kicks before flipping away. Only when she did, one of the robots fired, hitting her square in the chest. She let out a shriek as she skidded across the ground in a heap of twisted metal.


His exclamation attracted the racecar-robots, which turned their faceless visors towards the boys. Jack gulped.

"Uh, oh," Raf squeaked.

One of them step towards the humans.

"Run!" Jack yelled and the pair took off, but the robot was faster.

It lunged forward, scraping its claws in the ground in front of them. The boys screamed simultaneously and reeled back, just a squeal of tires filled the air. Jack glanced up to see the yellow Camaro was back, driving off the unfinished bridge above them. It transformed midair, into a bulky yellow robot, about the same size as the opposing pair.

It landed on the ground with a deafening slam. Just as the menacing robot was about to encircle its claws around Jack, the Camaro-robot crossed the distance with impossible speed, landing a sucker punch to the monster's head. As the robot fell, the yellow one's arm shifted into a barrel shape. There was a high-pitched clap, and there was a burning hole appeared in the menace's chest. The other one let out a furious screech.

Jack only blinked. Did… did that thing just save his life?

Suddenly there was a loud honking.

"Oh, now what?" the teenager cried.
This time it was a military-green armored Humvee, twice the size of the racecars. Sure enough, it skidded to a halt and transformed into a twice as big robot.

"Who's ready to rumble?!" it challenged, in a deep, gravelly male voice. Did they all talk?!

By now, the motorcycle-robot recovered. The racecar knew it was outnumbered, but it let out another bone-chilling scream and charged. It was caught by the yellow robot, who gave it a crushing blow before sending it to the other two.

The three robots passed the thing around, it was like an absurd game of catch. It ended when all three converged on its dented and twisted form. The Camaro gave a powerful punch that sent it back to the Humvee. Its hand morphed into a mace-like shape and came down on its back. As it fell, the little motorcycle leaped up and blades ejected from her arms. She sliced the racecar's neck, sending sparks and wiring flying until its head was completely severed from its body.

"And another one bites the dust!" the bulky robot exclaimed.

Jack didn't know how to react. He and Raf just stood up against the wall, staring.

"Whoa…" Raf breathed.

"Yeah," Jack agreed. "I guess that's one way to put it…"

It was the yellow robot that noticed them. It let out a series of buzzing and beeping noises. Then the other two glanced over. Jack shivered. He just watched them utterly destroy another pair of robots. He didn't want to know how easily they could kill him.

"What do we do with them?" the big one asked. The blue one, the one that got Jack into this mess, was quick to answer.

"You two head back to base," she ordered.

"What? We can't just leave them!"

The yellow robot let out a whirring sound, as if in agreement.

"Optimus's orders. We honor the treaty."

The other robots made that engine-like sigh and slumped in defeat. In a blink of an eye, they transformed and the Camaro and Humvee sped off. Leaving the she-robot with the awestruck boys.

Jack did not dare move as she stepped closer.


"I don't exist," she hissed as she knelt down so she could be at his level, setting him in place with a glare. "Tell anyone about us, and I'll hunt you down."

"O-o-kay," Jack stammered.

The robot transformed and sped off into the desert.

If I had known, you would have been properly destroyed.

Jack was limping the next day. His entire was sore from the events from the day before. His mom freaked out when she found her son covered in scrapes and bruises, and the best he could come up with was that he fell down the stairs. Somehow she believed it.
Jack didn't sleep that night, between digesting what he had seen and the terrifying image that he would look out his window only to see a robot. It was the same in his classes, as he tuned out the lecture and fumbled for words when the teacher asked him a question. The class snickered and he sunk into his seat.

When bell dismissing seventh period rung, it was a relief that the day was over. He beelined for his locker, only for a textbook and a pile of papers to land in front of him. When he heard the frustrated sigh, Jack plucked the objects up and handed them out to the owner, only to freeze when he was greeted with Sierra.

"Oh, thank you," she greeted as she took the papers from him.

"Oh, h-h-hey, Sierra," the boy stuttered.

"You know my name?"

"We're in homeroom together..."

"We are?"

"I-I'm Jack. Jack Darby?"

Recognition lit up her face. "Oh, the military kid."

Jack's heart sank. "Y-yeah..."

A blonde girl called Sierra and the redhead quickly dismissed Jack and scurried away. The boy slumped. Over two years, and still no one knew who he was. Just the "military kid." His crush didn't even bat him an eye. The teenager swore he could hear amused laughter.

With a sigh, he went to the front steps of the school. Mom had a shift at the hospital today, and he had no interest riding the bus, where he would be stuck with twenty curious kids. Looks like he was walking home today. He saw a familiar figure waving at him.

"Raf, hey," Jack greeted.

"It's Jack, right?" Well, at least somebody knew who he was. The freshman glanced around to see if anyone was in earshot before beaming up at him. "Can you believe what we saw yesterday?"

"No, not really."

"What do you think they are?"

"Talking cars that turn into robots. Or the other way around. I don't really want to find out." The teenager rubbed the back of his neck. "Look, let's just keep this between us and forget anything ever happened, okay?"

A friendly honk interrupted them. Jack almost screamed as the yellow Camaro pulled up to the curb next to them. Raf gave an excited gasp while the older teen groaned. Oh, not again! The car opened its passenger door with a series of beeps.

"He wants us to go with him," Raf realized.

"Uh, let me think about that," Jack retorted. He gave a pause for effect. "No."

Another series of electronic chirps.
"It's okay," Raf assured. "He just wants to talk."

"How do you know?"

"He said so."

"You understand him?"

A buzz.

"Your ride's over there," Raf said, pointing across the street.

At the blue motorcycle waiting for him.

"Oh, hell, no."

His protest fell on deaf ears as he heard a car door close. He snapped his gaze back to the Camaro, only to see Raf buckling into the passenger seat. No! He was being kidnapped by robots!

"Raf?!" he yelped. The engine revved and the car took off. "Wait! Stop!"

It was too late. The car disappeared around the corner, leaving him alone with the motorcycle. Jack pointedly looked away. He walked down the street, towards home. The motorcycle pulled up beside him, driver in place. Looking at it with fresh eyes, Jack realized the driver was too perfect.

"I didn't tell anyone and I'm not going to," Jack assured in an annoyed tone. "So you don't have to follow me."

"Relax," the robot-transforming-motorcycle assured. "I just want to talk to you."

"So you can run me over again?"

"Kid, there's a lot you don't understand."

The boy waved his hands in exasperation. "I get it, I get it. First rule of robot fight club is that you don't talk about robot fight club."

"It's more complicated than that," the vehicle spat.

"What you need to understand, is that I don't want a bunch of crazy talking vehicles following me around, trying to get me killed!"

They had rounded the corner, out of sight of the school and the other kids. The motorcycle immediately took advantage—cutting in front of him and pivoting around to confront him. Jack stopped at the obstacle in his way.

"'Jack,' is it?" the motorcycle inquired. Great, now she knew his name! "Your personal safety is exactly why Optimus Prime has requested an audience with you."

"Optimal what?"

"Optimus Prime," the she-robot corrected. "You may be in danger because you are one of the few, the only few who have even seen us."

Jack sputtered, not knowing a proper response to that. No, he wouldn't be dragged into this. He wouldn't—
"Dude!" an excited voice squealed. "What are you waiting for?!"

Jack spun around, only for his heart to sink at the figure that greeted him. Miko Nakadai, the exchange student.

"Go with!" she encouraged, oblivious to what he was talking to.

"Scrap," Jack and the motorcycle cursed simultaneously.

Jack was on the motorcycle again, much to his displeasure, and to make it worse, Miko was sitting behind him, arms around his waist. Make it even worse than that, they were following the yellow muscle car through the desert, probably to wherever these things hung out.

Finally.

The sun bore down on his back, but instead of heat, the boy felt cold. Malicious gazes watched him, waiting.

No, no, no!

They headed due west, right off the highway.

Show me the Autobot base.

They had driven twenty-two miles, out in the badlands.

He couldn't tell them!

He remembered movie night, with Mom and Dad. Top Gun was his Dad's favorite...

Not this time, fleshy.

A piercing ring assaulted Jack's senses. Suddenly a large outcrop appeared ahead of them, surrounded by other ancient formations. Jack wanted the motorcycle to stop, to turn around, to take him home. He didn't want to be here.

But the vehicle pressed on, straight at the outcrop with no sign of slowing down. Just when the teenager thought they would crash face first into the cliff face, metal doors yawned open.

Into the nuclear missile silo.

The Autobot base.

"Excellent," Megatron purred.

Jack was filled with shame. He could do nothing, no matter how much he wanted to scream or warn the Autobots in front of him. Do nothing, but watch the memory play out, Megatron behind his back, vigilant as the rest of his memories.

He felt shame when Optimus Prime introduced himself as leader of the Autobots. He felt shame when the Prime told them the story of Cybertron, and the tyranny of Megatron. He was nothing like the Prime.

Pain was the first to greet Jack as he returned to his dark world. His limbs felt like lead. His stomach was twisted into a knot. His head felt like it was splitting apart. He was trembling, madly. His vision
wouldn't stop spinning and he felt horribly light-headed. And it was so, so cold.

Jack couldn't focus on a single thought, or what he had just done.

He did nothing. The human merely turned over to his side, curling himself into a ball, hugging his knees and pulling them to his chest.

Megatron was triumphant.

"Now we know," Knock Out purred.

"What do you know, the insect is good for something," Breakdown jested.

The Decepticon leader looked down at the boy, still cradled by the machine. He was disconnected, but he was unmoving as he lay in a tight ball. Megatron's observation was interrupted by light footsteps.

"Send Laserbeak to confirm the base's location," the warlord ordered. They had to be sure.

Soundwave nodded silently. The communications officer's chassis shifted until it broke off, transforming into the shape of a flyer. With a zealous squawk, Laserbeak zipped away with a promise of information.

"I guess we don't need this thing anymore, do we?" Knock Out stated.

Megatron glanced back to see the medic hovering over Jack. The Decepticon transformed his arm into a surgical drill, already spinning. He lowered it.

"Stop," the Decepticon leader commanded.

"My liege?" Knockout inquired, pausing and looking back at him with a puzzled look. However, he did not dare question his lord as Megatron held out an open servo.

"Give the boy to me."

Breakdown and Knock Out exchanged glances, and even Soundwave sent a curious glance in his direction. But none of them said a word, instead drawing their sporadic fields close. Lord Megatron's word was final.

Knock Out picked up the human, not too gently but he was mindful of his claws. While it took the medic two servos, it only took Megatron one to carry Jack. The silver giant felt the little creature shaking against the metal of his palm.

"Report to me when Laserbeak returns," he merely ordered his subordinates.

With that, he stalked out of the laboratory, leaving behind three confused Decepticons.

Megatron received several glances as he traveled the length of the ship, his drones no doubt curious why their lord held a human. But they were quick to correct their mistake and respectively bowed their heads, some of them even dropping to a knee. Megatron paid them no mind.

The Decepticon noticed Jack stopped trembling by the time the dictator reached his personal quarters. He glanced down to see the boy was unconscious again, but this time his chest fluttered unevenly and his breath was ragged. Megatron considered.
He did not need to know extensive knowledge of human anatomy to know Jack was ill. Perhaps he too was suffering side-effects of the patch. Or the human could not adjust to the cold atmosphere of his warship. Or, something else. Humans required fuel, did they not, no different than a Cybertronian required energon.

Only problem, was that there was no food on the Nemesis, and the Decepticons had no methods of attaining any. There was only one energy source in their possession. Megatron regarded the frail little being in his servo.

Energon was incompatible with humans. He had seen how they would near a cluster of crystals or a Cybertronian with their strange little devices, only to recoil, yelling something about "radiation." Then again, energon had been present on Earth for thousands of years, even before the War, when traveling Cybertronians horded their energon storages. Yet the presence of energon did nothing to hinder the rapid growth of humanity.

Perhaps these humans, were not as fragile as he once thought.

Megatron placed Jack on his berth, gently. The human looked too much like an insect, being a tiny dot on the expansive plane. The sight almost made the Decepticon leader think again, but he was already committed. How would he know for sure, if he did not try?

Megatron had not done this in a very long time, not since his ancient days, even before his time as a Champion. He had no desire or reason to, until now. The Cybertronian offline in optics, in concentration.

His body transformed.

Jack awoke to the sound of a transformation. Hearing it every day of his life, he had grown classically conditioned to react to the sound. Gears cranking, wiring changing shape, and metal plated shifting into place. He opened his eyes to see a shadow over him, only the shadow to disappear before he could focus.

The teenager closed his eyes, trying to let sleep embrace him once again. Where he didn't dream, where he wasn't surrounded by Decepticons, where he didn't see the past. His only escape from this hell.

Jack slip into unconscious was interrupted by a weight on his stomach. Something wrapped around his arm in a vice grip, almost crushing. The human forced his eyes open to slits, only to see two ruby orbs glaring down at him. He yelped and tried to flinch away, but the grip on his arm held him in place.

"Hold still," Megatron ordered.

Jack trembled when he recognized the Decepticon leader above him. Then his mind did a double take.

Wait. Something was wrong. Megatron was so much closer than he was before. Usually the warlord towered over him, in his titanic size, but he was... smaller. Jack stared. Megatron, which moments ago was the size of a building, was now the height of a human adult. Just the right size to sit on his chest without crushing him.

Jack was speechless, mouth agape, unable to say anything or ask how in the universe what was possible. He watched as Megatron brought a clawed servo to his fanged face. With a vicious growl, bit into his own servo, between his thumb and forefinger. Something hot and sticky dripped onto
Jack's cheek. It burned, like acid. He was too frozen to flinch, instead watching with disconnected 
fascination as bright violet liquid seeped from Megatron's wound.

Megatron seemed unfazed to self-mutilation, instead watching the substance collect at the tips of his 
fingers. The warlord gave a wicked smirk. The same one he gave Jack, down in the mines.

Jack gagged as suddenly Megatron's bloody claws were in his mouth, scrapping against the back of 
his throat. A toxic, metallic taste covered Jack's tongue. The human jerked his head away, trying to 
get away from the noxious flavor.

Jack spat out the violet essence, but the taste still lingered. His entire mouth burned. His throat 
constricted. His body trembled. Suddenly something hard wrapped around his chin.

"Look at me," Megatron commanded.

"S-stop!" Jack pleaded, his voice cracking in his panicked state.

His protest was futile as the warlord forced a claw into his mouth, prying his jaw open and holding 
his head in place. Then the acidic taste returned, the burning sensation spreading to his throat.

Jack groaned. Megatron laughed. The boy flailed, desperately, but the stronger being had him 
effectively pinned. The Decepticon's knees were on his arms and pushing him off felt bench-pressing 
a mountain.

The human could feel the poisonous heat travel down his throat, into his stomach. It spread to his 
chest, his limbs, his head. His vision spun wildly, unable to focus on anything other than those 
crimson optics, watching him with a predatory sneer.

Then everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

    Well, then. *runs away*
Memories


The teen scanned his surroundings and instantly recognized the bowels of the Autobot base. He was on the couch, in the little corner he and the other kids made for themselves. Was... was it all just a dream?

Then Jack felt that foreboding, suppressing presence.

"You got what you wanted, Megatron," the human spat, glancing up to see the Decepticon tyrant standing over him, arms behind his back. Jack knew what would happen next. The Decepticons had no use for him. "So just get it over with."

Megatron let out a raspy chuckle. "Be assured, I have no desire to terminate you."

The human stood up from the couch. He didn't notice how effortless it was, or the satisfied smirk Megatron gave. He fixed his captor with a glare. "Then what?"

The sterling titan, now the size of a human, gave a wicked grin and stepped forward. This time Jack stood his ground, but couldn't help the twisting of his stomach as the monster's blood-red eyes raked up and down his figure.

"Optimus has put a great deal in trust in you, hasn't he?" the warlord merely replied with his own question.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

Megatron's satisfied look was nasty. "So he must put a lot of confidence in you."

Jack realized where this was going. "I'm not telling you anything about the Autobots."

The Decepticon tilted his head. "And why not? You've showed everything else in your life."

Disgust and shame came up Jack's throat like bile. He swallowed it back down. "I am not telling you."

"Why do you resist? Knock Out learns more about your psychology every time we do this. It's only a matter of time before we gain total access to the corridors of your mind." When Jack said nothing, Megatron went on, taunting. "Do you think the Autobots will come for you? My warship is cloaked from their scanners and they are incapable of flight. They have no idea where you are, how to find you. No one is coming to save you."

Jack knew Megatron felt that flicker of fear and uncertainty before he could hide it. He kept up his brave charade. "So what? I just become a Decepticon? Yeah, right."

"You save yourself from further pain by cooperating with us."

"You said it yourself. You've seen what I've gone through. I know what it's like lose something and have it hurt. I don't care about feeling more pain at this point."

"As you wish."
In a blink of an eye, Megatron crossed the distance between them. Jack choked as vicious claws wrapped around his throat, squeezing painfully as he was lifted off the ground. The teenager instinctively gripped the Decepticon's wrist and kicked his chest, only for his attack to bounce off harmlessly.

Suddenly the false world panned as Megatron twisted and rose Jack higher, effectively throwing him through the air. The youth cried as he slammed into the nearby wall, his head colliding into the concrete. He groaned into the ground. He had no time to recover as he heard the furious stomps of Megatron draw near. Jack quickly pushed himself up to his knees, only to receive a right hook from the Decepticon leader.

He wheezed as he was sent back down to the ground. He gasped as a hard kick was delivered into his stomach. Bile rose to his throat. The human instinctively curled up on himself, holding his abused torso. Megatron laughed.

"What happened to that promise, Jack? Aren't you supposed to be brave?" the warlord taunted. Fury gripped his heart. No, the tyrant would not use his father's words against him.

"Shut up," Jack snarled.

"Is this enough pain? Or do you prefer more?"

Megatron grasped the back of his neck, pulling him from the floor. He sent an uppercut to Jack's chin, snapping his head back. The force of the blow exposed his stomach, allowing the champion to send another powerful kick to his torso. The human went flying back into the wall with a wail.

"Oh, how your father would be disappointed in you," Megatron purred.

"I said shut up!" Jack screeched.

Somehow he was on his feet again. He charged towards Megatron, prepared to rip him into scrap metal. Only the Decepticon leader anticipated the attack, easily dodging his clumsy strikes. Jack's pathetic assault was cut off as the menace seized him by the throat once again.

"You will submit," Megatron growled.

"N-no," the human refused.

He shut eyes. He didn't want to be here anymore. He wanted to go home. He wanted the Autobots, his friends. He wanted Mom. He wanted Dad. Arcee. She always protected him. Like when—

"That's it," Megatron cooed. "Good boy…"

He didn't want this. He didn't want any of this. He didn't even want to be in this war. War had taken enough from him.

It broke his family apart. It took his uncle. It stole his father away from him forever. Yet somehow, Jack found himself in the middle of a civil war of alien giants, not only fighting each other, but fighting over his world. He still didn't know how he ended up on the Decepticon's warship, the Nemesis.

He totally blamed it on Miko. The reckless girl had sprinted into the groundbridge and the boys followed her, and ended up being part of the rescue mission for Agent William Fowler. It was only because of Arcee and the other Autobots that they got out of there alive. That was enough for Jack.
Miko could go off on the suicide missions and Raf could make best friends with the robots.

The teenager walked through the groundbridge without looking back. Miko came later that night, trying to change his mind. She had the perfect life, and she called it boring and now felt like she needed to run head-first into life and death situations to get her adrenaline rush. She didn't get it. She didn't understand what it was like to lose someone, to have the people he loved depend on him. Still, Miko seemed heart-broken when Jack ignored her plea to come back to the base. For some reason, it hurt his own heart.

Then Arcee returned. Jack didn't know why. She admitted what the boy had suspected. She was mourning. She lost someone, just like him. Jack almost wanted to say something to her, but didn't have the chance.

For the first time in three years, the Decepticons were making a move. They were going to use something they called a "spacebridge" to transport an army of the undead—like something out of a bad movie. But it was real. Megatron was going to destroy them all.

Maybe it was the fact dawning on Jack was why he agreed to infiltrate the satellite relay. It was supposed to be the safest job the humans could get, until they ran face-to-visor to Soundwave, Megatron's surveillance chief. The silent Decepticon could have easily destroyed them, but he merely regarded them with a clicking noise before jetting away. Jack felt guilt when he realized their first and only job was a failure.

Dad would be so disappointed in you.

By sheer luck, the Autobots came out victorious, even putting Megatron out of commission, but the Decepticons were still a threat. It was then Jack realized.

He didn't want this. He didn't want any of this. But he was part of it, anyway. It was his home. And he would fight for it. Protect and serve, just like he had been told all his life.

Arcee took him home after the day's excitement, quietly pulling into the garage. When she didn't say a word as he slid off, he realized she was still sulking. He didn't blame her. He still wasn't over his father's death. The boy paused at the door, standing for a minute before letting out a sigh.

"I... I lost my—my dad died, in war, three years ago," he let out, hitting himself that it came out so awkwardly. Arcee said nothing, but she turned her wheel in his direction, listening. "He was killed by a roadside bomb while out on patrol in Qatar. Three tours around the world. You wouldn't believe the insane stories he would have—the ambushes, the raids, the shootouts." Jack paused for a second and let out a sound between a sob and a cough. "And it was a bomb some crackhead made in his kitchen that killed him."

The son tried not to dwell how unfair it was.

"I know you lost your partner," he dared to say. "And I'm not trying to say I understand, because trust me, no one understands. I'm... I'm just trying to say that—" That was when whatever courage the boy built up failed him. What was he trying to say? There's nothing that people didn't already say all the time. Jack gave a sigh of defeat and tried again. "I'm just trying to say, I know..."

He quickly opened the door and move to slip away from the horribly awkward atmosphere he had created. Arcee's voice stopped him.

"Jack," she called. He paused. She said it softly; not a bark, not an inquiry. Like an equal. "Thank you..."
The boy closed the door.

He and Arcee got along after that, sharing that pain of loss. They would still have their bouts of bickering, but they found themselves falling to the same rhythm—Jack leaning into the saddle whenever the motorcycle turned, no communication required. The teen found something in common with Miko and Raf, too. He and Miko talked about how Jasper was so different from the major cities they lived in—Washington D.C. and Toyko, respectively. He and Raf found a common interest in video games, and they were able to set up a TV and a console in the base (much to Ratchet's annoyance, as he complained the "inaccurate" sounds ruined his concentration). Raf ended up tutoring Jack in math, and his grades improved in the subject for the first time in years.

The youth found himself spending more and more time at the base. A few times he stayed overnight, sleeping on the couch or on a makeshift cot. Eventually he found himself tagging along on missions. Nothing dangerous—the Autobots made sure of that—usually just patrols or scouting missions. But that didn't mean he and the others didn't get in their misadventures.

Like how they infiltrated a train to secure a nuclear weapon, only for their ride to get hijacked by MECH, a high-tech terrorist organization. When the paramilitary group couldn't secure the weapon, they blew out the track, and it was only Optimus Prime's intervention that saved their lives.

Optimus Prime always had a soft spot for the weaker ones.

Despite the near-death experience, the kids volunteered to secure an Engeron Harvester, a tool built by ancient Autobots turned into a Decepticon weapon. It was their job to take it from a Greek museum. It was then they met Breakdown and Knock Out, but the Autobots held them off. The teenagers got the relic all the way to the dock until a night guard caught Miko, carting her off. Jack heard metallic steps, light and quiet.

"Arcee!" he called.

The garage door was forced open, and Jack almost screamed to see Soundwave. Like before, the Decepticon merely regarded them. Raf and Jack backpedaled from the relic—and the Cybertonian—as much as possible. Soundwave took it as permission to swipe the Harvester and took off. Another mission, another failure.

Jack got himself into street racing after that, partly to boost his self-esteem, partly to knock Vince down a few pegs. Arcee adamantly refused, but he convinced Bumblebee to do it, even though the 'Bot was not his partner. Only for Knock Out to be in the same race and got Vince kidnapped by the Decepticons, who mistook the teen for an Autobot ally. Jack had never seen Optimus mad, nor did he ever think that the Prime could get mad, but he could tell from the leader's stoic expression that he was livid. Arcee certainly was. Megatron was merely amused.

Then he met Airachnid.

Is that fear I sense, boy?

Jack and Arcee were in a forest, just was supposed to be a simple recon mission. Detectors picked up some sort of energon surge. Jack was brought back to his camping days. The mosquitoes the size of vampire bats and the zero bars on his phone certainly helped remind him. However, his flashback abruptly ended when they found the crash site.

A jet-black, smooth, wicked spaceship, bigger than his house, was buried in the ground. It rested at the end of a large trench, where it had obviously dragged across the ground at high momentum before coming a halt.
Jack watched anxiously as the little Autobot cautiously neared the fallen ship, disappearing into it bowels. He waited a solid minute before a strange, high-pitched sound came. The boy flinched. He never heard that sound before, but he knew it was Arcee.

Ignoring his instructions to stay put, Jack sprinted over to where the two-wheeler vanished. He froze at what he saw. Arcee was crouching on all fours, armor plating bristling, wings up, and faceplates drawn back in a snarl. Her optics were dilated, glowing the dim light of dusk. She was letting out a low, deadly, distressed growl. It was almost like the Autobot was a pissed off cat. A giant, metal cat with a gun.

The proud Cybertronian would never admit it, but Jack could see it. He didn't even know Transformers could be like that. Arcee was afraid. And Airachnid hunted on fear.

Jack hated spiders. Airchanid was something worse. Much worse. He knew Megatron could feel the terror that filled the memory as the ex-Decepticon pursued him through the forest, thirsty for his blood. Like it was a sick game of cat and mouse.

But his father taught him how to survive. All those camping trips, all that hiking, it was good for something. Jack used the fire starter Dad had given him for his tenth birthday. The energon lit, and the Decepticon shuttle went up in flames.

You held your own against one of my greatest hunters. Perhaps there is something… more, to you humans.

Those same skills saved him, when he, Miko, and Raf, got themselves in another dimension. Megatron seemed particularly interested in that memory, even though it was one Jack's least favorite. Being chased by a zombie Decepticon, not his forte. Especially when throwing in a scheming Starscream, whom was trying obtain the power of dark energon for himself.

You never learn, Starscream.

Jack wanted to say he had enough close encounters with Decepticons after that nightmare, but he did not have that luxury. His crushing terror returned with fervor as he remembered Airchanid. She wanted revenge against her humiliation at the hands of him and Arcee, but she wasn't alone.

MECH was with her, hungry to learn the mechanical secrets of the Transformers. To make it worse, his mother was involved, and Airachnid used her in another twisted hunt. It was most terrifying night of Jack's life. He almost lost all he held dear, including his own life, if Agent Fowler hadn't shown up with U.S. military reinforcements. Jack realized his mistake too late.

The pain of losing a loved one. That is what you fear.

Jack couldn't hide his shame he felt, that once again he had to be saved. He was so useless.

You fear not having control.

"Master, the human's biological systems are peaking again," Knock Out reported dutifully. "I suggest we abort, unless we want to keep a worthless bag of flesh."

"Very well. We have what we need."

Megatron onlined his optics as he felt the strange coding fade away. He processor swam at the flurry of alien emotions he had been assaulted with. Three solar cycles of scouring through a human's mind had its toll, even for him. The mighty warlord kept his face stoic as he slowly rose from the medical
berth. He had seen Jack's emotions, each one strange and foreign.

He observed Knock Out removing the cortical cable from the boy's spine. His body spasmed and lay still. He did not even make a sound. Megatron cocked an optic ridge, but was interrupted when the door opened. A sultry floated across the air.

"When am I ever going to be let in on things?" Airachnid questioned in a half-hurt, half-mocking tone. "I had to hear over communications that we had an Autobot captive, and I wasn't even invited."

Plating bristled and Megatron felt the brush of Soundwave's field flaring. The communications officer withdrew it before the huntress could sense it, instead looking at her impassively. Knock Out did not attempt to hide his disdain at his fellow comrade. Breakdown merely sulked. The Decepticons did not share the same fear of Airachnid as Jack, but they had the same disgust. Airachnid pretended to be oblivious to it.

Desertion was of the highest treason, whether if was within the Autobot or Decepticon ranks. Megatron did not tolerate desertion. But Airachnid was useful to him in the War of Cyberton, and she vowed her loyalty again, in exchange for her life. Reluctantly, her unique skills were something Megatron needed, if he was to conquer this world. In addition, he could tell Airachnid was miserable being under constant supervision. He would not deny he enjoyed her suffering.

However, that did not stop his troops from recoiling from the reinstated Decepticon, not only because she was a known traitor, but an Insecticon. Megatron was not deaf to the discrimination against the breed of Cybertronians.

More beast than sentient, Insecticons were ruthless killers, owning more mindless bloodlust than intelligence. Bugs, barbarians, savages—they were called. However, Megatron had seen proof that was not the case. Airachnid was a prime example, a case that proved more unfortunate as time went on.

"Because you were supposed to be acquiring a fresh energon source," Megatron retorted in a low growl.

Soundwave stared pointedly at Airachnid. Knock Out sent his lord a nervous glance. Breakdown took a step away. They all knew that dangerous purr, the one that promised pain if their master was not appeased. No one questioned Megatron's authority.

Airachnid was oblivious as she looked around the room, searching for their prisoner. Her compound eyes settled on the tiny figure on Knock Out's medical slab. She immediately grinned widely, revealing fangs with a pleased hiss.


Megatron said nothing, even as Airachnid crossed over to the unmoving human. She poked him with one of her appendages, turning him to his back. Still nothing. If only the human knew the object of his greatest fear was right above him. Airachnid's look was predatory.

"If I may, Lord Megatron," she spoke up. "Allow me to... spend some time with the boy... to ask a few questions. It is my expertise, after all."

"Been there, done that," Knock Out drawled triumphantly.

"What?"
"We have used the cortical psychic patch to siphon the human's mind," Megatron explained. "He has provided a plentiful of information. …Including the location of the Autobot base."

Airachnid’s lips curled and her field was filled with disappointed anger, but she quickly repressed it. Immediately the Insecticon resumed her relaxed position and continued in that smooth tone.

"I assume we are to prepare for invasion?" she inquired.

"I assume you have my energon?" Megatron asked instead.

Airachnid flinched, insulted at being dismissed and obviously caught. "Ugh, no."

"And why not?" the Decepticon lord demanded, resuming that warning tone.

"There were complications…” After a glare, the Insecticon explained, "The Autobots. They attacked the mine before I could properly secure it. We were forced to abandon it."

"I hope you left nothing behind?"

"No, my lord."

At least she was competent enough to know not to allow a valuable asset in the hands of the enemy. If Megatron could not have it, no one could. Still, he considered this information. It was the third attack on his energon mines since he captured Jack—the Autobots were looking their lost pet.

"Kill me, and the Autobots would retaliate," Jack pointed out. "Arcee would come after you."

Megatron chuckled aloud. Looks like the youngling was telling the truth. The loss of a few assets was hardly a blow to the Decepticon cause. However, the Autobots had chosen to which tactics—hitting Decepticon strongholds in order to draw out higher command. The dictator did not underestimate his enemy.

They were led by a Prime, a legendary guardian of Cybertron—of Primus himself. The Autobots were a team of unlikely Cybertronians, but they were not incompetent. They had foiled more than one of his plans, and were eager to do so again. It was not a matter of if, but when the Autobots successfully captured a mine, taking its spoils for themselves, or gained valuable intel on Decepticon plots. Neither he could afford.

Megatron knew full well he had the advantage. He lad a larger army, greater weaponry, more resources, and now, the element of surprise. The Autobots were too busy looking outside their base to have any inclination that Laserbeak had confirmed their location. He could take the Nemesis onsight and level the silo to the ground.

However, it would be pointless of the Autobots were not home. It was obvious they were out of the comfort of their sanctuary, if they were boldly challenging the Decepticons. And it was because the Autobots were increasing their surveillance that caused another problem. Megatron’s enemy was on their guard—awake and alert for any Decepticon activity, and no doubt preparing for a possible attack. Perhaps they already had a protocol in place.

Megatron had to ensure the destruction of his enemy. The Autobots had recovered from loss before. If they were given the chance of recovery, then it ensured the war would continue for eons more. The Autobots must die. That would be considerably easier if their guard was lowered.

Megatron gave a cruel, knowing smile. Perhaps Jack could still prove himself to the Decepticon cause, after all.
June walked through the hospital in a daze. Gone. Her baby boy was gone.

"The 'Bots said Megatron took Jack alive," William Fowler had told her. "It's likely they'll use him as a hostage."

As if that was assuring. The federal agent had pointedly ended it at that. But the mother wasn't a fool. She saw the way his jaw tightened as he said the words, and that solemn look in his eyes. The man had rubbed his shoulder, as if soothing an old wound. He was hiding something.

She still couldn't believe that there was a secret war of alien giants right behind her backyard, and that her son was a part of it. June had a hard time wrapping her head around it, especially as Jack described her what the Decepticons were. Evil aliens, that wanted to destroy the Earth for their own ends. It sounded absurd. Even with accepting that there was other life out there, June couldn't understand why the Decepticons had traveled millions of light years, encountered hundreds of planets, and why they had chosen Earth.

But if the woman understood correctly, if the Decepticons truly wanted to oversee the annihilation of the human race, they would have no reason to take a human captive. Unless—

*Oh, God, please don't let them hurt Jack*, the mother prayed. Her hands trembled as she clamped the IV, preparing to give the patient a fresh solution. She hoped no one noticed.

She already lost her husband. She could lose her son, too. Not when Jack was the only one she had left—

"June," a voice barked.

June blinked and was startled to find a watery film over her vision. Her hand holding the spike was shaking madly as she fumbled to connect it to the saline solution. A second pair of hands quickly seized it from her before she could spike her own hand. June looked to the floor in embarrassment and to hide her tears as Dr. Michael Debiase, the hospital's head physician, took her place and properly connected the new IV. She was silent and trembling as he said a few assuring words to the patient, who was recovering from alcohol poisoning. It was only a matter of weeks ago that was the biggest of June's concerns with her son, that he would experiment with the wrong combination.

Not... Not—

June fought back a sob as she closed the door behind her. She moved to slip away, preferably the bathroom to find privacy, but stone eyes cut her off.

"What's going on with you?" Dr. Debiase pressed, not harshly, but demanding an answer.

June couldn't blame his concern. As head physician, he needed his staff in proper shape to run his hospital. His cropped hair was a gleaming silver and crow's feet came from his eyes; he had been in the medical field for decades, and longer than anyone else in the hospital.

Furthermore, the man was the closest friend she had. They had known each other for decades, even before she moved to Georgia to be with John. Michael knew her better than anybody. He knew she was not an emotional woman that cried over spilt milk. He knew something was wrong.

"I-I'm fine, r-really," June stammered, regretting how tired and lame she sounded. Dr. Debiase saw right through the pitiful assurance.

"When was the last time you slept?" he questioned, folding his arms.
"Last night," June answered. "I went to bed at 9 p.m., like always."

"June, you have bags under your eyes, you act like you don't hear I word I say, you can't replace a standard IV, and Ms. Rosa still hasn't been given her daily medication." The woman suddenly remembered her boss had reminded her to tend to the patient. Two times. The physician fixed her with a look.

"Look, I have people's lives at stake," he said sternly. "If I can't trust you to do your job right—"

"Michael, I'm fine."

The man sighed and gently placed a hand on her shoulder. He ushered out of the main hallway, out of the way of the bustle of the emergency room.

"Go home, get some rest," Dr. Debiase ordered softly, but firm at the same time.

That was the last thing June wanted to hear. At least at work, she was busy. She could focus on something that didn't involve aliens or giant robots or her missing son. Even if the moment of escape was fleeting. Here, she couldn't cry, and had to keep a strong façade. She thought if she appeared strong, she would be so, even if it was miserably failing.

But if June returned home, there would be no distractions. Instead, she would be surrounded by photos of what she was missing. She would do nothing but be lost in tears, and would not be able to tear herself from the phone, or the front door. She could only wait, until she heard from Agent Fowler, or Jack came home. Whichever came first.

The desert air was dusty and dry as always as the pair stepped outside. They moved out of the way of main entrance, off to the side under the shade of a tree that was somehow spared from the stifling heat.

"It's nothing," the woman continued to protest. "I'm j-just stressed, that's all."

"About what?" Michael asked. "What happened, June?"

June could hear the fearful concern slipping through his professional tone, and it made her want to tear her heart in two. He said those exact same words to her after John's death. Right there, she wanted to let the walls fall. She wanted to cry, to scream, to rave at the unfairness of it all. Her baby boy was gone and she couldn't tell anyone.

She was merely assured that the Autobots and the U.S. military were doing everything in their power to find Jack. That wasn't enough. It was ripping her apart from the inside out. June wanted to tell her longtime friend. Everything. Then he would understand—

A squeal of tires interrupted her.

June instinctively spun around, just in time to see the ambulance skid to a halt before it could crash head-first into a deep blue jeep. The all-terrain vehicle didn't even notice as it continued to race towards the ER at a frightening speed.

"Watch out!" Michael shouted as he grabbed June's arm and yanked her out of the way.

There were several startled screams, June's among them, as people scrambled to safety. There was a screech of abused brakes and then a sickening thud. The nurse glanced up to watch the jeep tear
away, throwing up dust. She automatically looked for a license plate, but found none. Instead, she saw an eerie, menacing insignia on the rear tire hiked on its back.

A Decepticon.

"Oh, my God," Dr. Debiase suddenly exclaimed next to her.

June followed his shocked gaze towards the ground. She let out a cry.

There, laying deathly still, was Jack.
Recovery

Jack…

A high-pitched sound pierced Jack’s dreamless sleep. Then another. And another. And another.

The boy moaned, complaining. The irritating noise continued in spite. Jack opened his eyes, in order to find the source and shut it up. Only for piercing white light to assault his vision. He let out another moan as he shut his eyes tight.

It was then the boy felt a cocoon of warmth around him and his head was buried in plush. A bed? Jack forced his eyes open again. His retinas burned for a few moments at the intense light until he suddenly made out a white ceiling and a panel of fluorescent light above him.

Beep… Beep… Beep…

Jack glanced to his left to see a series of screens, numbers etched across them. A desk, covered with bright screens, glyphs scrawling over them.

He noticed a bag filled with clear liquid, a tube extending from its end to the crook of his arm. He reattached the cable, and Jack screamed as his body convulsed.

The teenager was nestled underneath three thin, white blankets, wrapped precariously around him. A soft and warm material was pressed against his skin. All of his senses were robbed, except for the intense pain that invaded his muscles.

Taking in the greyish-white walls around him in a modest-sized room, Jack realized. He was in St. Maria’s Hospital, in Jasper. Jack didn’t know how long it took for his white vision to be replaced by shapes. Distorted, discolored shapes.

Pain pulsed from behind Jack’s eyes. The boy gritted his teeth and raised a hand to his face to massage his brow, in a vain attempt to alleviate the headache. Jack felt strangely disconnected from his body. He couldn’t think straight, his train of thought breaking before he could form a whole one.

What happened? Why was he in the hospital?

“Jack…” a soft, concerned voice spoke.

The boy’s heart fluttered and he looked to his right to see deep blue eyes, just like his. Raven-black hair, identical to his own, was tied into a high-ponytail.

“Mom,” Jack choked out. He was startled to hear how hoarse it sounded.

Jack shifted to sit up, only to flinch as the bed let out a humming sound. He felt the mattress, which he realized was alternatively pressurized, readjust to his weight. Suddenly he felt a dull throb from his right leg, spurred by the sudden movement. Then Jack remembered.

There was a sound of grating stone and the crushing weight on Jack’s leg disappeared.

“Very well, human…”

Megatron. The Decepticons. They captured him. They took him aboard the Nemesis.

Jack closed his eyes. He remembered Knock Out and Megatron standing over him. That never-
ending, unbearable agony. Then he dreamed and dreamed. Of the past.

He regarded the woman before him. Was… was this another dream?

“Are you… real?” he murmured before he could stop himself. To a sane mind, it must have sounded like a ridiculous question. Mom merely smiled, assuring.

“I’m here, sweety,” she hummed in that whisper soft tone.

Without his permission, Jack’s throat tightened. It was really Mom. Not a ghost, like the ones had haunted him.

“Mom…” he whined, his voice pathetically small.

Suddenly the sixteen-year-old felt like a little boy again. He wanted to forget all the pain and suffering in the world, and only care about the warmth of his mother’s arms. All he had to was lean forward, June reacted automatically.

She protectively wrapped her arms around his shoulders, letting his head fall in the crook of her neck. Jack let out a single choked gasp. Mom hushed him, comfortingly. The boy tried to hold up the walls around him, but the ocean of emotions burst through the dam without warning.

His vision blurred as tears fell from his eyes. His throat constricted, painfully. He felt cold, making him tremble uncontrollably. June held him tighter and stroked his back. Jack wailed. He cried and cried.

He never wanted to be a part of the Autobot-Decepticon War. He wanted to go back to the way things were, before tragedy tore his life apart. He wanted Dad.

It wasn’t until his uncontrollable sobbing turned into pitiful hiccups that Mom finally let him go. Trying to save whatever was left of his dignity, Jack furiously rubbed the tears from his eyes. He accepted the klenex offered to him.

Somehow he drifted off again, because the next time Jack opened his eyes, orange light of the sunset poured into the window. Mom was still by his side, sitting up straight and alert in the chair like a lifeguard looking for drowning victims. She jumped to attention when Jack let out a groan. She immediately gripped his hand, firmly.

“It’s okay, Jack,” she whispered soothingly.

The boy blinked to see a figure standing in the corner. *He ignored the dark presence in the corner, watching.*

Jack flinched and snapped his head in the figure’s direction. He was greeted with William Fowler.

“Welcome back,” the federal agent greeted.

The federal agent looked aged as well, with dark circles under his eyes and his usually perfect coat was wrinkled from use.

“H-how did I get here?” Jack asked. June’s expression was solemn.

“A jeep drove by the hospital yesterday,” Mom explained. “Threw you out of the back. You had three doctors over you before it even turned the corner.” The woman’s voice was strained as she told the story, as if she was brought back to the terrifying moment. When Jack said nothing, she
swallowed and continued, “You were severely dehydrated and you had an infection.”

“The doctors said you’re going to be fine,” Fowler assured, seeing the boy’s horrified look. Jack looked over as the agent, but he didn’t fail to notice his mother’s strained look. As Fowler took a seat next to the bed, he asked, “Do you remember what happened, Jack?”

“Agent Fowler, maybe this can wait until later,” Mom suddenly insisted before Jack had the chance to speak.

“N-no, I’m fine,” Jack refused, slowly climbing into a sitting position. He was startled when the mattress suddenly growled and shifted beneath him. He realized it was a pressurized bed. He tried to ignore it, instead trying to think back.

“I… I was in the mine, with the Autobots,” Jack recalled. Fowler nodded, as if confirming he was right. “…Then there was Megatron.”

The pain pulsed, intense enough that Jack paused.

“Take your time,” Fowler encouraged.

“He… took me aboard the Decepticon warship,” Jack told the man. “Then…” He remembered the cold walls, surrounding him. The Decepticons chattering above him, sending him sadistic sneers. Then… Jack let out a shaky sigh. “I-I don’t remember.”

Fowler didn’t seem deterred. “Did they do anything to you? Did you say anything?”

“Agent Fowler,” Mom snapped.

The man adverted his attention to the woman. He dropped his voice, low enough so he thought Jack couldn’t hear.

“We need to know if he talked,” he whispered.

“He says he doesn’t remember.”

“I’m right here,” Jack protested. The adults looked at him. The boy closed his eyes, thinking. A headache was the only thing it rewarded him. He opened his eyes, shaking his head. “I… I guess I could have.”

Fowler nodded again, his expression solemn and stone-like. “That’s all I need to know. Thank you. It’s good to see you.”

Jack felt like the sentence was cut off too abruptly, especially when the man suddenly got to his feet. The boy only blinked in confusion, a strange fog clouding his mind. Fowler murmured something to June and slipped out the door, silently closing it behind him. Leaving the mother and son alone.

There was silence between them for a time, Jack trying to will the cloudiness away as Mom protectively held his hand. Then the woman let out a sighed.

“I was so worried about you…” she whimpered.

The son blinked opened his eyes and glanced at his mother. Her red were red and puffy, with dark circles under her eyes. Even with his retarded thoughts, he realized she had been crying. It looked like she didn’t have sleep for a long time, either. It took a few moments for the boy to think of what to say.
“I’m here now, Mom,” he assured lamely. She only shook her head.

“I thought I lost you. I almost did lose you.” June fixed her son with a firm stare. “Do you have any idea how close you were?”

Jack heard that tone before. “I’m f—"

“Jack, you had a fever of 105,” Mom cut off. “Another degree would have been death. Your proteins were denaturing—you don’t even want to know how low your albumin and globulin levels were.”

The caring mother was already gone. Instead there was Nurse Darby. Still, the news shook Jack to his core. He was really that sick? How could he gotten that way in the first place?

“I’m not even—” Jack tried to start, but his mother cut him off.

“The cut on your leg was infected.” Cut? Jack shifted his leg, only to feel fiber against his skin. Gauze. Was it really that bad? Mom seemed to read his thoughts. “The gash that was utterly filthy—probably from all the dirt and pests in the mines—and wasn’t properly cleaned.”

Jack was suddenly tempted to give Knock Out a review on his medical expertise. Or lack of, rather. Instead, he did a double take on what his mother said.

“You know what happened?” the teenager asked.

“Agent Fowler told me what happened. What were you thinking, going into a place like that?”

The mine, she meant. Jack’s senses were returning, because that teenage defense mechanism kicked in and he was quick to retort.

“I was perfectly safe with Arcee—” Apparently there were drugs in his system, because he realized too late it was a very poor choice of words.

“Safe?! Look what happened to you! If I have known that was what the Autobots were dragging you into you, I would have thought twice about letting you go the silo that day.”

“Mom, I chose to go.”

“Do you know what my biggest fear is, working here?” Mom demanded. Jack knew, but the woman went on anyway. “To see you being carted through those doors. And when I saw… when I saw you on the ground like that—” June swallowed and forced out, “Not moving…”

Jack couldn’t help but feel a pang of guilt. How long had he been gone? Judging by the exhausted look on Mom’s face, it had to be a few days. How many nights did she go without sleep, wondering the fate of her dear son? It was a mother’s worst fear. An even greater one as a nurse, realizing her son was the patient. Jack swallowed.

“I-I’m fine now,” he stammered, carefully. He didn’t know what else to say. “Everything’s gonna be okay. I’ll… I’ll be more careful from now on, I promise.”

Suddenly the tears in Mom’s eyes disappeared as soon as they appeared, but her voice was still taut.

“You will be,” she confirmed. “Because you’re not going to that base anymore.”

Suddenly Jack’s world came crushing down around him. He nearly leaped from the bed. The pressurized mattress groaned in protest.
“No, you can’t do that!” the teen protested hastily.

“I can and I will,” she retorted, firm and triumphant at the same time. “As long as you live under my house, you live under my rules.”

“Mom, you can’t take away the Autobots away from me! They’re family!”

The woman crossed her arms. “What am I, then? Chopped liver?”

The army brat tried to salvage this horrible situation he found himself in. It would be so much easier if he wasn’t attached to three different machines and his head wasn’t swimming.

“No, no—I mean, yes,” the boy fumbled, confusing himself more than anything. “I mean, of course you’re family! The Autobots are like… extended family. *Distant* extended family.”

Mom merely cocked an eyebrow. Jack took a breath and started over.

“The whole reason I’m with the Autobots so much is because they’re supposed to be protecting me,” he explained.

“They do a great job of doing it,” Mom replied with sarcastic venom.

“I’m a target of the Decepticons. Now more than ever. Even with what happened in the mines, they saved my life. I wouldn’t be here right now if it wasn’t for them.”

Again, Jack realized his poor choice of words.

“Exactly,” June snapped. “You wouldn’t be in this room if they hadn’t put you in danger.”

“Mom, *please*,” the son begged. “I seriously don’t know what I’ll do without the Autobots. I said I’ll be more careful, and I meant it. No more recon missions. Cross my heart.” He even made the motion, but the mother still looked skeptical. “I’ll do anything else but that. Anything.”

There was a silence for a long time as June stared at the wall. Jack honestly couldn’t tell if it was in defiance and contemplation. Just when he though his head would burst from the anticipation, there was a defeated sigh.

“Fine,” Mom forced out. “You can stay with the Autobots.” Before Jack could let out any sort of celebration, she added, “But I’m taking the motorcycle.”

The boy’s elevated heart fell back down to his stomach. “What do you have against *Arcee*?”

“Nothing.” The teenager suspected that was a lie. “I’m against the vehicle. You can still hang out with Arcee, but at the *base*.”

“You can’t downgrade me from a 1-20-speed to a 10-speed!”

“What?” Mom seethed.

“…I mean the normal speed limit which is 65 miles per hour.”

“45.”

“…Since when?”

“Now I’m definitely taking the bike,” Mom huffed with a roll of her eyes, exasperated. “You just
said you would do anything else. These are my conditions.”

Jack argued anyway, “Anything but that!”

“Deal’s a deal, Jack.”

“You’re literally punishing me for being kidnapped! Who seriously does that?!”

“I’m punishing you for this complete lack of responsibility you’ve gotten into,” June retorted, her tone holding no room for argument. “This is the straw the broke the camel’s back. I know you and Arcee are close and you consider… them your friends, but that’s no excuse to completely ignore your well-being.”

Jack rolled his eyes. He had just woken up from a coma, and he was already getting lectured. Cliché parenting quotes included. The universe was cruel, indeed. He pointedly looked away, staring out the window. June sighed.

“You know I love you,” she insisted. “It’s because I love you I made this decision.” A pause. “Your father left us, Jack. I don’t want to lose you, too.”

Jack’s heart clenched. Left. Three years now, and it was still all she could say. Dad had left them, and he didn’t come back. The son said nothing, pouting even though guilt clawed at his heart. He didn’t react as Mom pressed her lips to his temple with a mother’s warmth.

“Try to get some sleep,” she ordered in a whisper, as if the previous argument never occurred. “I’ll come back to check on you soon.”

With that, she left the room.

“You’re alive!!” a voice cheered.

Before Jack could even open his eyes, a weight fell on top of his stomach. Without his permission, his body tensed.

“Hold still.”

The teenager yelped and shot into a sitting position. Almost colliding heads with Miko.

He wheezed at the pain the sudden movement caused. The medical bed groaned. The girl leaned back, her hazel gaze staring at him with relief and excitement.

“Ha!” the Japanese exchange student shouted triumphantly. “I knew you couldn’t be dead. Raf said you were dead.”

“No, I didn’t!” the fourteen-year-old protested as he walked into the room.

“Wow, thanks for sticking up for me,” Jack muttered with a hint of sarcasm.

“What are friends for?” Miko giggled.

Jack huffed, unable to think of a proper response through the fog of painkillers. Mom kept her promise and came back to check up on his status, Dr. Debiase in tow. As the ER’s head doctor, the man usually jumped patient to patient, but he made an exception to deal with Jack personally. He
was the boy’s godfather, after all.

The head physician was relieved to see Jack was conscious and that his health was improved. His fever was down, his skin had regained some color, and his leg began the proper signs of healing—pink instead of yellow. Dr. Debiase warned there was still a road to recovery. His white blood cell count was still high—signaling there was infection lingering in his body. Further, it took a few days for the body to regain all the water loss from dehydration. So, the doctor judged to keep the boy under watch in the hospital for a couple of days, and he estimated it would take at least a week to fully recover.

Jack’s stomach twisted during the physical. Three days. It only took three days for him to become this weak. No food, no water, no medicine.

“How fragile you creatures are.”

Naturally Dr. Debiase tried to get a story out of him—mostly an explanation why he was thrown out of a car and left in such a state. The cover story was that Jack went offroading in the desert with some friends. He fell off of his bike down a ravine—gaining several lacerations, including scathing his leg and hitting his head. When he was knocked unconscious, his “friends” took him to the hospital, but afraid of facing consequences, they had fled.

The doctor was terribly skeptical, and Jack agreed it was a shitty story. But what else could he say? Yeah, I was abducted and experimented on by aliens. Who, by the way, want to conquer the Earth and destroy humankind.

All that would gain him would be a transfer to the psychiatric ward.

“Get off,” Jack groaned, pushing Miko’s shoulders.

The girl slid of the bed, her rebellious pink streaked hair bouncing over her shoulders. The mattress readjusted. Miko hopped onto a chair and Raf took the other.

“How are you feeling?” the youngest of the three asked.

“Like crap,” Jack replied in a moan.

“So what happened to you?” Miko demanded in a hasty question. She fired off several others before the teenager had a chance to reply. “Were you on the Decepticon warship? Or do they have a super duper secret prison? Did they torture you? Who was there? Megatron? Soundwave? Knock—?”

“Sh!”

Jack didn’t want to sound cruel to Miko, but his head pulsed with pain from the beginnings of a headache. He had trouble deciphering her questions, and he didn’t think he could answer them anyway. The teenager was trying to figure it out himself.

“I… I don’t know,” he admitted uncertainly. Miko tilted her head. Raf just showed a puzzled look. “I don’t remember… what happened, exactly.” Jack furrowed his eyebrows, trying to recall his time on the Nemesis. Images of his childhood flashed instead. Then there would be darkness, and… that presence. “M-Megatron was there… I think.”

There was a pause of silence.

“Do you think…” Raf spoke up timidly, but paused as if he didn’t know how to continue the sentence. Not with Jack and Miko staring at him. “You told them anything?”
Jack swallowed. Images of the Autobot base flashed across his mind. His chest tightened and his migraine returned in full force.

“I-I’m not sure,” the boy sighed, defeated and uncertain.

“The Autobots will figure something out,” Raf assured.

The Autobots. Arcee.

“W-where are they?” Jack asked.

“Bulkhead and Bumblebee are outside with Arcee,” Miko answered. When the elder teen gave a questioning look, she added cautiously, “…She hasn’t left the parking lot since you came in.”

Jack’s gut twisted at that. Mom was in a panic attack when he talked to her. He couldn’t imagine what the two-wheeler was feeling like right now.

“Is she…?” he trailed off, not knowing how to phrase the question.

“She feels pretty bad about what happened,” Raf replied in a careful tone. “I think she blames herself somehow.”

It hurt when Jack swallowed. Miko voiced his concern for him.

“Which is totally not true!” she protested, throwing her hands up in exasperation. “It was all Megatron!”

It was then the fifteen-year-old girl proceeded to tell him the Autobot’s encounter with the warlord in the mine. Bulkhead and Miko found him once again trying to terminate Starscream, and when they tried to terminate him, he had practically used Jack as a meat-shield. Arcee valiantly tried to save him, but Megatron fled before she had the chance. Jack didn’t remember any of it.

“Kidnapping is one thing,” Raf commented when she finished, “but why would the Decepticons send you to a hospital?”

“Megatron said something that he wouldn’t kill you,” Miko added. “Because you didn’t kill him or whatever.”

Jack was silent for several long moments. “…That’s true.”

His friends’ reactions were simultaneous. “What?”

The teenager told them his own story, how he was caught by the Decepticon leader, and of the deal he made. He found the driller, and actually planned to terminate the evil tyrant himself, but couldn’t bring himself to do it. Jack shouldn’t have been surprised by their reactions.

“Are you an idiot?” Miko screeched. “You had him!”

“You just let him free?” Raf questioned in a much more contained volume, but Jack could still hear that skeptic tone underneath.

“Optimus wouldn’t do it,” the teenager defended himself.

“He wouldn’t rescue his arch-nemesis, either!” Miko argued.

Great. Like he didn’t already have a lecture from Mom.
“Look, it was a mistake,” Jack snapped. “And I’m the one paying for it. So just back off, okay?”

It came out harsher than he meant to. Both Miko and Raf blinked at the outburst, but said nothing. Guilt captured the teen in a vice grip.

“I’m sorry,” he sighed. “I’m—I’m just not in a good place right now.”

“Is that fear I sense, boy?”

There was awkward silence for a time, none of them knowing how to continue the conversation. Jack leaned back into his bed. He felt light-headed. He decided to end the quiet.

“So… what did I miss at school?” he asked.

Apparently he missed a lot. Miko had assimilated to Jasper’s culture quicker than he did, because she knew everybody in Jasper High and what they were up to. She gave a recap of the entire school newspaper, all the gossip and rumors floating around the hallways, and a quick description how she got into a detention again.

“It was Sierra’s fault!” Miko protested. “I was late to class because she was in front of my locker having a make-out session with—”

The Japanese student quickly cut off when she realized her mistake. Raf cringed and glanced at Jack. The high school junior kept his face impassive, but his chest twisted.

“What?!” he asked, trying a curious tone. Like it was just the popular girl everybody followed. Not the girl he was horribly lovesick for.

“Sierra started dating Vince,” Miko blurted out rapidly, like she was trying to rip off a band-aid. Nausea took Jack in a vice grip.

“I’m gonna be sick,” he moaned.

“Yeah, tell me about it.”

“No, I’m serious.” Jack forced himself to sit up, only for the room to spin. “Get me something—quick.”

Miko and Raf jumped to their feet and ran around like headless chickens.

“How is there not a bucket in here?” Miko wailed.

Jack was already working on an alternative solution. Being a nurse’s son was good for something, because he quickly detached the IV in his arm and removed the monitors stuck to his skin. He ignored the blaring of alarms, instead making a break for the bathroom.

The teenager slammed the door shut and fell to his knees. He leaned over the toilet for a full minute. Jack leaned back with a moan when he finally finished. He quickly flushed to get rid of the toxic scent, not giving the violet soup a second glance. The boy raised himself on shaky legs and hobbled to the sink.

Coughing, he rinsed his mouth to get rid of the flavor. The nausea had lifted, but now he was shaking and his joints ached. Jack washed his face, the cool water oddly soothing him. He straightened with a tired sigh.

Only to see blood-red optics.
Jack screamed and jumped back, slamming the wall. His reflection in the mirror stared back at him like a deer in headlights. He almost jumped out of his skin when there was an urgent knock at the door.

“Jack, honey?” Mom’s voice came. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m fine,” Jack stammered.

The door opened and June and Dr. Debiase trailed in. The mother placed a palm on her son’s brow.

“Your fever’s back up,” she reported.

“Let’s get you back in bed,” his doctor ordered immediately.

Each adult took an arm and guided him back to his sickbed. Jack usually would have refused, but he was grateful for the support. No doubt he would fallen flat on his face without it. As they passed the window, the boy glanced outside to see the clear sky of Jasper, Nevada.

His home.

Far below on the ground, right underneath his window, was a vigilant motorcycle.

It was two days after his episode that Dr. Debiase deemed Jack was clear to be discharged. His protein levels were restored, his fever had broken, and he kept down his meals. The doctor still warned he would still need rest, prescribing him an antibiotic to be precautious. There was an added warning of a side-effect, including nausea, which Dr. Debiase explained what caused his spell.

The main concern was Jack’s strength. He estimated it had been a solid week since he had any sort of exercise, and he was feeling the consequences. His legs trembled when he stood and his walk was wobbly. Mom insisted on getting a wheelchair. The son adamantly refused.

The desert sun was bright and harsh when Jack stepped out of the hospital in sweatpants and a sweater. The boy squinted his eyes, but he didn’t fail to see who was waiting for him. He swallowed and turned to his mother.

“Can I get just few minutes?” he asked. Mom glanced at his guardian parked by the curb, waiting.

“You can talk to her,” she allowed, but her tone was curt, “but remember our agreement.”

Jack waddled to Arcee, head low as he watched one foot step in front of the other. His hands were stuffed in his pockets despite he felt like he was going to tip over.

“You look awful,” his partner observed bluntly.

“Yeah,” Jack agreed.

He glanced up to see the false rider was in the saddle. At least it wouldn’t look he was talking to a sentient motorcycle. The human opened his mouth, even though he didn’t know what to say, but the Transformer beat him to it.

“I’m sorry…” Arcee whispered, staticky and barely audible. The proud Autobot almost never apologized and he had never heard that sort of tone from her.
“It’s not your fault,” Jack assured, remembering what his friends had told him.

“I put you in a dangerous situation. I failed to protect you. You’re here because of me.”

“That’s not true. You couldn’t have known the Decepticons were going to be there.”

“But I should have known,” Arcee snapped, angrily. Jack winced at the harshness, but something told him it wasn’t directed at him. “I’m your guardian. I’m sworn to protect you.”

“You saved my life when we were down there, and you do protect me,” Jack insisted. The motorcycle said nothing. The boy sighed. “Arcee, you can’t beat yourself up over this. You’re just letting Megatron win.”

“It’s not beating myself up if it’s a fact.”

Why were Cybertronians so stubborn? Jack hoped mentioning the Autobots’ sworn enemy might cause a reaction, but the alien being was still sulking. The teenager decided to change tactics.

“Dr. Debiase, my mom’s friend at the hospital, says I’m gonna be fine,” Jack assured. “In a few days I’ll be good as new. I’m already feeling better. And Mom’s going to look after me.” He then added under his breath, “Probably even more, now—”

He stopped. Arcee noticed.

“What?” his guardian questioned.

Jack’s mouth felt dry and his tongue stopped working. He had been dreading this moment for days, and he still didn’t know what to say.

“So, I, um… I talked to my, um, mom, and…” Jack hated how he sputtered whenever he was uncomfortable. He let out a sigh of defeat. “I can’t go around with you anymore.”

Arcee was quiet for such a long time the boy thought she didn’t even hear him. Then—

“You’re upset with me…” It was so quiet Jack had to strain to hear it.

“N-no! Mom’s mad at me, more than anything. Well, I’m not doing too hot at school, so putting the wheel clamp on the car tends to be the standard parent punishment.” They both knew it was a lie.

“…I understand.”

Was it possible for a motorcycle to sound so broken?

“It’s called being grounded,” Jack explained, as if he could remedy this horrible situation. “It’s a temporary thing. I’ll still be able to hang out at the base and all.”

“I wouldn’t want to endanger you further.” The sorrowful bitterness in Arcee’s voice made Jack want to break into a million pieces. He opened his mouth to protest, but the motorcycle was already in reverse. “Feel better, Jack.”

Without another word, the boy’s partner drove away.
Dealing with the Devil

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jack spent an uneventful weekend at home, under the watchful eye of his mother. Though it was the boy’s first instinct to go to the base, he didn’t have that luxury. With his partner exiled from the house, he didn’t have a ride. Mom refused to take him there, with the excuse he was still healing. So he was stuck catching up with a week’s worth of homework.

Then it was another week of school, and Jack had to find ways of transportation. When Mom couldn’t drive him herself, either Raf and Bumblebee or Miko and Bulkhead gave him a ride to and from school. Mom said he couldn’t drive an alien robot, she said nothing taking a lift with one.

Though it was significantly better than his hand-me-down bicycle, Jack still found it less favorable than his own transportation. Apparently part of Miko’s morning ritual was listening to Slash Monkeys. On full blast. Jack, not a fan of Bulgarian shriek metal, found the experience less than enjoyable. Though rides with Raf were significantly quieter, most of the time was spent with Raf and Bumblebee talking to each other in practically their own language. If Jack happened to be involved in the conversation, Raf translated mostly what the speech-impaired Transformer was saying. If the ‘Bot wanted to talk directly to sixteen-year-old, he would manipulate the radio frequencies to speak for him.

So Jack had a choice between being deaf or being the third-wheel.

School itself was routine. The junior caught up quickly and returned to dozing in lectures, making a failed attempt to appear that he was alert. No one seemed to notice his disappearance, not even his teachers. Especially not Sierra, who true to Miko’s word, was head over heels over Vince. The jock held a possessive arm over her at all times, and Jack one too many times witnessed them committing more intimate acts. It made Jack’s stomach churn to the point he almost became nauseas again. He pointedly ignored Sierra’s giggles from something Vince was whispering in her ear as Jack stared out the window, ignoring the monotone voice of his biology teacher. Instead he was thinking of Arcee.

Jack had not seen his guardian since she left the hospital. The emptiness of the garage was like the emptiness of his heart. Arcee had tweaked his phone so it could connect directly to her com-link, but she did not to reply to any of his texts. The army brat had gone to the base only once, but the little Transformer was oddly vacant, supposedly on patrol. The human knew it was a lie, if the torn expressions on the Autobots was anything to go by.

Jack’s stomach knotted. He knew Arcee wasn’t angry with him. She was guilty, as if her exile was her own fault. As if her presence alone would put him in danger. Jack wanted to talk to her, just once, to tell her it wasn’t true. He missed his friend.

“Jack Darby.”

Jack jumped at Megatron’s deep, menacing voice. His heart jumped to his throat. How—? He twisted around, fight or flight instincts kicking in, only to meet the leer of Mr. Herman.

“Yes?” the teenager gulped.

“Answer the question, Jack Darby,” the instructor demanded. Jack wanted to shrink when he
realized all eyes were boring into him.

“Um, what question?”

Laughter. Mr. Herman rolled his eyes. The student’s cheeks reddened.

“The bark scorpion, would it be considered an insect?” the teacher asked.

…When the hell did that come up.

“Er…yes?” Jack guessed.

“No.”

“Oh.”

Another round of laughter.

“Maybe if you bothered to do the reading last night, you might know that.”

Jack would have, but he left his biology textbook at the base, which he was practically banned from. Plus he had hundred calculus problems he had to finish. Mr. Herman picked another victim.

“Vince Chase, can you explain to the class why it is not an insect?”

The teacher turned his back to the class, already expecting an answer, allowing Sierra to whisper in Vince’s ear.

“The bark scorpion—whoever came up with that one was high.” Mr. Herman had to shush the class’s laughter. “Is part of class Arachnida, because it has eight legs, not class Insecta, which only has six legs.”

“Correct.”

Vince sent a smug look in Jack’s direction. The junior rolled his eyes. As if answering a bug question was an accomplishment. Nonetheless, the teenager was one of the first ones out when the dismissal bell rung. He scurried down the stairs to his next class, not seeing the limb stuck in his path in time. It collided with his leg with force. His "bad" leg.

Jack yelped as he tripped over the obstacle and summersaulted all the way down the staircase, crashing into a heap on the ground. Over his disoriented moans, he heard a malicious cackle. Vince.

“Watch your step, Darby,” the other teen advised in a smug tone. “Hate for you to lose a week from another fall.”

Jack quickly got to his feet, trying to regain his dignity. He didn’t have much to lose, because only a couple glances were sent this way. He was greeted with his tormenter’s freckled face.

“ Heard you lost that bike of yours,” Vince mocked. Jack tried to walk around him. The bully blocked him off. “Probably for the best. One less bad driver off the road.” The bully sneered. “And I was getting tired of looking at how ugly it was, anyway.”

Jack fought back a sigh. “You done?”

“ Might want to go clean that up,” Vince offered instead, gesturing his own cheek. “You look unattractive with that.” He turned around to finally leave, but then paused and looked over his
shoulder. “Well, more than usual, anyway.”

Whatever book Vince was getting these insults from, Jack did not want to read it. Nonetheless, he wiped his face, looking at his hand to see a smear of blood.

“You shouldn’t let him push you around like that,” Miko’s voice came from behind him.

“He just wants attention,” the teenager replied.

“Not if he keeps tormenting you.” Now the Japanese girl was blocking his way. Oh, he just wanted to get to class! “Come on, Jack! Stand up for yourself!”

“I’ll think about it.”

With that, he turned around, hurrying to the closest bathroom to dress his wound. Thankfully it was barren, as students were using the last minute of break to make to their lectures. Jack glanced at the mirror, only to notice a bloody gash on his cheek. He couldn’t get a break.

The student ignored the bell as he cupped water in his hand, splashing it on his face. The raw tissue stung, but he toughed out the pain until his face was clear of red. Jack straightened, reaching for the paper towels to dry himself off.

Only to see Megatron’s fangs smirking at him.

Jack yelped and spun around, pressing his back to the sink. He found himself alone. But he was just — The boy glanced at the mirror again, only to see his own reflection. No Megatron, standing menacingly behind him. His grip on the sink tightened until his knuckles turned white.

Great. Now he was officially losing it.

Jack had work later that day. Raf dropped him off, and Mom texted she would come pick him up from her own shift.

It seemed his boss was the only one that cared that the boy was missing, as he demanded why the employee had missed five shifts. Jack explained the cover story and his medical excuse, trying to save his job. It seemed to satisfy the manager enough to give him mercy, but he still gave the boy an indignant look and left with a mutter. The rest of the shift was spent without incident. It wasn’t until he clocked out that he checked his phone.

One from Mom, saying she would be an hour late.

And still none from Arcee.

Jack sighed.

“Damn,” a voice gasped. Kyle, the only co-worker Jack tolerated enough to be friendly with. He was staring out the window, jaw dropped. He looked over at Jack when he noticed the boy was watching. “Did you see this car out here?”

“What is it?” Jack asked curiously, nearing.

In a town full of second or third generation cars that went no faster than 45 miles per hour, the teenager wondered what could possibly impress his friend.

“This sweet Aston Martin.” When Jack just stared, Kyle elaborated, waving a hand in exasperation,
“It’s a sports car. Ever see a James Bond movie?”

A sports car in Jasper. Didn’t hear that every day. Intrigued, the teenager settled next to his friend. Only for his heart to stop.

Sure enough, the vehicle in the parking lot was an Aston Martin. A bright red, shiny Aston Martin. Jack had seen that vehicle before.

Knock Out.

The boy recoiled from the window like it was going to explode. His heart started racing. Suddenly dark, ominous walls surrounded him, cold air pressing against his skin. He blinked the memory away, and he found himself having a panic attack in K.O. Burgers.

What was Knock Out doing here? Maybe he couldn’t stand the idea of a C-ranked human eatery having the same name as him. But then again, the Decepticon wasn’t in berserk mode, like Jack would expect him to be. Instead, sports car sat across from the main entrance, as if he was… waiting.

The teenager blanched. Knock Out knew he was here. Not good. Not good at all.

Kyle didn’t seem to notice Jack’s breakdown, still ogling the car. Oh, if only he knew. Taking advantage that his companion was distracted, the junior dialed a number. Only to retrieve static.

Jack cursed. Knock Out was scrambling the signal. That meant the cavalry wasn’t coming. The teenager doubted he could slip away, either. The Decepticon was no doubt alert to his presence, and the human as sure as hell wasn’t outrunning a sports vehicle.

Jack looked out the window, trying to think of options he did not have, only for a pit to form in his stomach. A pitch-black Dodge Charger with flames painted on its sides pulled into the lot, settling next to the Aston Martin. Vince. Posy included. They must have come to torment Jack, but as the school bully stepped out of his car, he found a new victim.

“Well, what do we have here?” Vince purred, a disdainful leer on the robot-in-disguise.

“No, no, no,” Jack muttered under his breath.

His plea was unheard as the posy circled the Aston Martin like a pack of wolves. The light of sunset reflected off of the side-view mirror as it watched them, dangerously.

“Someone thinks they own the hottest car in town, huh?” Vince sneered, settling on the driver’s side.

Don’t key him, don’t key him, don’t key him, the boy prayed.

One of Vince’s buddies, the teen couldn’t remember his name, leaned on the hood of the car, leaving oily fingerprints. Another nearly doubled over, trying to peer through the blacked-out window, muttering that he couldn’t see.

“Probably ‘cause it has a shitty interior,” the third little minion jeered. Vince’s sneer turned nasty.

“How about we find out?” he suggested, raising a padded elbow to the window. They didn’t find out.

Suddenly there was a high-pitched, electric sound. Jack winced. Vince and his goons went down, unconscious.
“What was that?” Kyle cried.

Jack didn’t answer. He burst out the back door, already jumping into a sprint. The growl of an engine came from around the corner. Jack ran faster. The engine came closer. The teenager cursed that the fast food joint was on its own little plot of land, disconnected from everything else. He just had to cross the street—

There was a loud squeal of tires, and steel collided into Jack.

Thankfully Knock Out’s hood was low, so that the human merely rolled onto it rather than being thrown across the ground. With a groan, the boy slid off, gripping his abused limb. Why was everyone targeting his leg today?

“Gotcha,” Knock Out said triumphantly.

“Says you,” Jack hissed through gritted teeth.

Swallowing down the pain, the teenager leaped back to his feet and continued his sprint. There was an angry rev and another squeal as Knock Out tore after him, continuing the chase once again.

Jack made it across the street, now he had to make it across yet another parking lot, this one for the town’s only shopping center. It was nearly empty, only a few deserted cars, allowing the military brat a straight shot towards the line of stores. If he made it into one of them, Knock Out couldn’t come after him. However, the Decepticon had a straight shot, too.

Jack heard the purr of the sports car behind him, right on his heels. He knew Knock Out could easily run him over again, but he didn’t. The ‘Con was toying with him. Suddenly there was a shriek above the teenager.

Jack yelped as something hard slapped the side of his head. He raised his arms in defense, just in time to fight off a black mass pouncing on him. Sharp edges sliced into his arms and shoulders, not deep, but harassing. Jack recoiled, trying to get away from his attacker.

He was greeted with a metal monster. It looked like a bird of prey, blades of metal making up broad wings and talons for feet. A wicked looking tail whipped at the air and a long neck ended at a sharp beak. Malicious crimson optics stared down at the human like a vulture finding a meal. Laserbeak, Soundwave’s surveillance drone.

No bigger than a human, the cassette was a tiny Decepticon, but just as vicious. Laserbeak swooped down for another attack, forcing Jack to stumble back. Right into Knock Out. Once again the human fell on the hood and slid to the ground. He pinned himself against the frame as Laserbeak didn’t repent. There was a click of a car door opening.

“I would get in if I were you,” Knock Out suggested.

Jack gritted his teeth, refusing. Laserbeak bit into his hand, drawing blood.

“But it’s really your choice,” the medic went on.

Jack cursed, loudly. He jumped to his feet only to duck away from the vicious vulture. He dived into the exposed passenger seat of the Aston Martin. The door clicked closed. Laserbeak let out a squawk that almost sounded like a laugh. With a flap of wings, the flying little demon flew away.

Jack panted, shoulders heaving, as his heart hammered in his chest. Between the sprint and the assault, his head felt light from the adrenaline. Knock Out merely strapped him into place, fiber of the
seatbelt unrelenting. He pulled out of the parking lot and onto the street. Jack tried to determine where the Decepticon was headed.

“What do you want?” the captive demanded.

“Lord Megatron has requested an audience with you,” Knock Out simply replied.

Immediately Jack’s blood turned to ice. It had been a week since his captivity in the evil tyrant’s hands. Strangely, he still couldn’t remember much. Every time he tried to think back, he only remembered dark walls and hellish optics. Ratchet hypothesized he must have been unconscious in some sort coma, and when he couldn’t offer anything to the Decepticons, they had no further use for him. Agent Fowler, on the other hand, guessed that they did something to Jack, and the boy merely blacked it out as a form of post-traumatic stress disorder. However, both were confused why Megatron, a ruthless dictator, would spare his enemy.

Just like Jack was confused why Megatron was asking for him. His stomach knotted. Knock Out drove towards the outskirts of town, but not straight to the desert like Jack expected. The boy heard no report, no request for a groundbridge. It made him more confused, and more anxious. Didn’t the Decepticon say Megatron wanted to see him?

Finally Jack recognized the Aston Martin was headed to the old jewelry factory, right outside the town borders. The boy remembered it was built by some jewelry manufacturer, who wanted to cheat the system and build on a plot of land that didn’t require huge amount of tax.

Not surprisingly, a plant in the middle of the desert didn’t work out, mostly because it was too far away from everything deliver materials or transport inventory. The fact is had a long list of safety violations didn’t help, either.

The plant was left abandoned, over a decade ago. Jack went there only once with a couple friends. Sure enough, they found discarded gems and rare minerals, even a diamond ring, but most of it had been stripped by looters that came before them.

Jack suspected Knock Out had more nefarious reasons for bringing him here. The sports car pulled around to the back, revealing the large dock, its massive garage door opened. Jack’s stomach twisted. That wasn’t supposed to be open…

Knock Out comfortably drove into the building, encasing the prisoner in shadow. Massive machines that made an absurd assembly line towered over the car, but they didn’t distract Jack from what took up almost the entire building.

Megatron.

The Decepticon warlord was kneeling low, as the main expanse of the factory was only a couple of stories high—too small for the titan. In the shadows of the warehouse, the spiked armor looked menacing. Jack trembled as he could feel those crimson optics boring into him through the windshield. Knock Out came to a halt before his master.

The confining straps around Jack’s chest retreated and the door popped open. Realizing he had no choice, the teenager slowly, cautiously, stepped out of the Decepticon’s cab. He practically had to climb to his feet and even in the gloominess he could still see his reflection in the side door.

“Come here, boy,” Megatron rumbled in a gruff order.

Jack gulped. He took a step forward.
“Closer.”

The teenager hesitantly obeyed, until he was underneath the monster’s intimidating shadow. He tried not to tremble, and did not look at his captor, instead staring at the ground. He flinched when the titan’s huge servo came behind him, blocking his escape.

The sterling giant tilted his head. “How are you feeling, little one?”

The question was asked in a soft, almost gentle tone, coming out as a low purr instead of a dangerous growl. It still made Jack wince, deciding it was more terrifying coming from the heartless beast. He went with the only defense he had: sarcasm.

“Oh, just dandy,” he snapped. “You should try the food at the hospital some time. The beef stew is awesome.”

Jack knew Megatron couldn’t care less to what he was saying, and half-expected for the Decepticon to backhand him across the expansive room. Instead, the giant only smirked at his spunky attitude.

“Better, I see,” he observed. “That is good.”

Something in the words made Jack decide it was not good.

“What do you want, Megatron?” the human demanded.

“A favor.”

Instantly the boy’s chest tightened. Definitely not good.

“You honestly I’m going to make another deal with you?” Jack challenged. Plating shifted as Megatron chuckled darkly.

“You misunderstand, my dear Jack—” The human flinched at the mention of his name. “—I have not come to negotiate. You will comply.”

“And if I don’t?”

“You are certainly more valiant than the last time we spoke,” Megatron chuckled.

Jack didn’t feel anymore brave, especially being reminded how he got in this horrible situation to begin with. Underneath that terrible gaze, he wanted to shrink into a ball and disappear. Maybe the reason he was keeping it together was because the teen had seen death in the face and walked away, or that he had a week to recover his senses. Or his natural defense mechanisms had finally decided to kick in.

Whatever the reason, Jack didn’t understand why Megatron was so amused by his open defiance. Didn’t intergalactic dictators expect total compliance?

“You’re going to retrieve something for me,” Megatron went on, interrupting Jack’s thoughts. It wasn’t a request. The army brat stayed strong.

“Why me?” the boy asked. “Can’t you just send one of your goons to do the job for you?”

“Normally that would be the case. However, what I require can only be accessed by a human.”

Jack’s brain racked with what he could possibly get but the Decepticons, a highly advanced civilization, couldn’t. He couldn’t come up with anything.
Frustrated he couldn’t think of an answer, and curiosity getting the best of him, the teenager demanded, “And what would that be?”

“Knowledge.” Jack didn’t like the sound of that, if the flash of wicked denta was anything to go by. “From your… ah, what do you call it, your security headquarters?”

Megatron made it sound like it was an innocent question, but it only made the human confused and anxious. What? Security headquarters? Being living weapons, the Autobot’s didn’t have security. Jack doubted Jasper’s sheriff’s office counted. National security? But that didn’t make sense. The closest thing to a headquarters for that was—

“The P-P-Pentagon?” Jack sputtered in a high-pitched yelp.

The sixteen-year-old knew he had to be wrong, even looking to his captor for confirmation. He was only greeted with Megatron’s satisfied look. His mind tried to wrap around the idea for a full minute, but failed and he spat out the first thing that came to mind.

“You’re crazy! Y-you want me to break into the fragging Pentagon?”

The warlord’s grin widened. “If that is what it is in your terms.”

Somehow saying it aloud and hearing it confirmed seemed to ground Jack to reality. But it didn’t make the idea any less absurd. The Decepticons couldn’t possibly think that he, a high school student, could just walk in the military headquarters and check out classified files like it was a public library.

Megatron said he wanted knowledge. The Decepticons wanted military secrets. To use against the humans, or…

Find the Autobot base.

“N-no way,” Jack shook his head. “I’m not doing that!” He glared up at the insane monster above him. “I couldn’t, even if I wanted to.”

“Why so?” Megatron asked, undeterred.

“I… I don’t have access,” the human explained, repeating the Decepticon’s earlier phrasing. “I can’t just walk in.”

“You are the heir to a soldier, yes?”

“I could be son of the president and I wouldn’t be allowed in!” The boy furiously shook his head again, as if trying to wake himself up from a horrible nightmare. “I won’t do it. You won’t make me work for you again.”

Megatron tilted his head. “Even if it means sparing the lives of those you hold dear?”

Reliving the pain of losing a loved one. That is what you fear.

Jack’s chest tightened, painfully.

“What are you talking about?” he asked in a cautious, hushed voice. He knew the answer. Megatron replied with a question of his own, and it threw Jack off balance.

“Tell me, did you find that book you were looking for?” the tyrant randomly asked.
What the hell did that—

“Mom, have you seen my textbook?”

Jack blanched as the suppressed memories came flooding back. Knock Out, using a cable to invade his nervous system, in order to learn enough about his biology to translate into Cybertronian coding. For the cortical psychic patch. He remembered how Megatron was there, watching his most secretive and most intimate memories, taking amusement from his misery. Including—

“Nononono,” Jack murmured rapidly, backpedaling. Right into Megatron’s servo.

He didn’t even notice, his heart rate spiking as all the air was ripped from his lungs. He instantly realized Megatron must have noticed his abandoned biology textbook. In the base. Jack told them.

“Th-the Autobots—” Jack stammered, but he couldn’t finish the question. He didn’t have to.

“Alive,” Megatron assured. “Airachnid is currently entertaining them at the Harbinger.”

Jack started trembling. Violently. Megatron was at the base.

“Quaint little place,” the Decepticon mocked. “I see why Optimus has taken a liking to it.”

“Y-you…” Jack hissed. When Megatron leaned forward, like he couldn’t hear, the teenager rose his voice to a shrill yell. “You slagging bastard!”

The warlord merely gave a dark chuckle at his outburst. “As I recall, you were the one that provided us the information.”

Jack violently flinched at the casual words. It was his memories. He showed the Decepticons exactly where to find the base. All because he was naïve to believe Megatron, stupid to make the mistake of sparing him, and too weak to resist.

“I wonder…” Megatron mused in a deadly purr, “what would your friends think? Optimus may be forgiving, but what of Arcee?”

Jack’s throat constricted. They wouldn’t forgive him. It would be all his fault. The boy didn’t realize his back was leaning heavily against Megatron’s palm, his shaking legs no longer able to properly support him. It took all his willpower not to collapse. He stared at the ground, trying to focus on standing up. He was not allowed that luxury.

Suddenly something cold touched his chin and forced his head up. When it could just as easily broken his neck. Jack looked into cold, blood-red optics.

“What do you are told,” Megatron growled. It was an order, that was not to be refused. “And I will allow the Autobots to remain unharmed.”

Jack shut his eyes, tight. Never in his life did he want to disappear than at that moment. He blocked out the suffocating presence of the monster surrounding him. He thought of the Autobots. Optimus Prime, and his calm, wise presence, who fought for others, for what was right, and never for himself. Like what a soldier should be. Bulkhead, the gentle giant of the group, who was always so easy to talk to. Bumblebee was always filled with energy, and always managed to infect the kids with it. Even Ratchet, as gruff as he was, was likeable in his own way, as it was those rare moments of softness that revealed that he truly cared.

And Arcee… His guardian. His friend. His partner.
They all would die, and it would be Jack’s fault. He swallowed. His throat felt raw. The next words were the most painful in his entire life.

“What… do you want me to do,” he forced out in a low, strained voice.

He didn’t look at the warlord above him. He didn’t have to, to know that his predatory optics flared and that he wore a wicked, shark-like smile of triumph.

“Hold out your hand,” Megatron commanded.

Jack opened a trembling palm. The warlord shifted and there was a *clicking* noise. Suddenly a tiny black object fell into the boy’s hand. It was smooth, black metal that sharp edges made up a small rectangle. Jack turned the device in his hand, trying to figure out its function. It almost looked like a wicked USB drive. He glanced up at Megatron.

“You will use this device will assist you in your task,” the Decepticon leader explained.

“What if I don’t know how?” Jack asked, curling his fingers around the object.

Megatron grinned darkly. “I have every confidence you will find a way.”

Jack merely gulped and stared at his fist.

“You have two days,” the tyrant went on. “Tell any of the Autobots of this, or fail to complete your task in time, well—” He gave an amused huff. “I will know.”

Jack had seen enough spy movies to know the consequences should he defy Megatron. Then again, his stomach knotted at the deadline. Only two days, to get all the way to Washington D.C. and hack into the defense network (oh, God, just thinking it was surreal), and prevent anyone knowing about it.

“T-that’s not enough time,” Jack tried to protest.

Megatron growled threateningly. The boy shrunk. He will obey. Or it would be his friends that would pay the price. The Decepticon leader glanced at the Aston Martin that was waiting patiently.

“Knock Out, you will return the human to his home,” the silver titan ordered.

Jack couldn’t tell if the following growl was an affirmative or a groan. Then again, he doubted the vain Decepticon appreciated being downgraded to a chauffeur. The teen merely stared at the ground between his feet, his nails painfully digging into his palms. His migraine had returned with a vengeance and his throat was raw. So swallowed up in his misery, Jack jumped when Megatron’s cold claw ran up his back.

“I trust you will not disappoint me, Jack,” the devil grinned with sharp fangs, purring out his name.

The boy felt sick.

He had dealt with the devil. Now his soul belonged to Megatron.
And the plot thickens.
I decided to use Bayverse’s version of Laserbeak rather than Prime, because honestly, I like the design better.
Impossible

Chapter Notes

Bit of a filler, so I apologize for lack of excitement in this chapter. I try to do my best to make things realistic in my writing, but I can only do so much for the next couple chapters. Point is: don’t try this at home, kids.

Mom was surprised that her son beat her home. Jack merely lied that Kyle gave him a ride, grateful she didn’t see the shiny sports car that rolled up to their house. He didn’t dare tell her that the Decepticons now knew where he lived. Before the mother had a chance to question him further, he fled to his room and shut the door. He collapsed on the bed, burying his face in his hands.

What had he done?

Shame welled up from the teenager’s chest, suffocating him. He felt like he was going to choke on the sense of betrayal that captured him. The Autobots trusted him, and he was going to be forced to throw their faith in their faces. Even worse, he would have to do the same to his own country.

The Decepticons wanted him to steal military secrets, and he knew it wasn’t for anything good. And he was suspicious that wasn’t all they wanted. Megatron delivered no instructions, no details of what he wanted. Merely to get a vague device inside the most secure building in the United States, and perhaps the world. What if it carried a virus? Then Jack would be responsible for crippling the defense network of the United States military. His father would be rolling in his grave.

I’m so sorry, Dad.

The child wasn’t a fool. It was an impossible mission. Maybe that’s what Megatron intended. The warlord was furious that his first plan to set Jack up for failure was denied, so now he would try again. But this time, he would bring the Autobots down with him.

Jack didn’t realize tears were slipping from his eyes until he pulled his hands away. He furiously wiped them away, but they persisted.

Why. Why did he obey a monster’s will.

Jack couldn’t sleep that night. He paced his room for hours. Instead of figuring out a way out of this horrible mess, he spent most of that time silencing his cries. If Mom discovered him, he couldn’t trust himself to lie. He couldn’t bear to face the Autobots. What could he possibly say? And Megatron would find out, somehow. The Decepticons found him easily enough.

Jack squinted in thought. Knock Out was the one waiting for him, but…

With a start, the teenager halted and stared out the window. For a full minute, he only saw the pitch-black darkness of his backyard. Then suddenly a shadow shifted, and piercing red optics blinked at him. Jack defensively closed the blinds, but he could still feel Laserbeak’s stare boring into him. His stomach knotted. The Decepticons were watching him.

Jack resumed his pacing. It wasn’t until his legs grew sore and his balance became unsteady that he finally laid down. He tried to sleep, even turning the lights out and curling under the covers. Every
time he closed his eyes, they would open on their own accord. Finally Jack sat up and took out his laptop.

He must have fallen asleep at some point, because he dreamed…

*Dark, cold walls surrounded him. He did not depend on the light, his senses detecting his surroundings for him. He knew this place, anyway. This was his domain.*

*No one was higher than him, and if they were, they shrunk beneath his height. Or they would be destroyed. Just like his enemies would be destroyed. Along with the insect species below, and his revenge would be complete…*

A harsh sound Jack woke up with a start. The boy felt cold sweat roll down his back, making his shiver. A headache pressed against his skull. The blaring alarm clock did not help.

Jack quickly slapped a hand on the snooze button, cloaking him in blissful silence. He read the bright numbers glaring at him.

**8:20 AM**

When was the last time he saw the clock? Six? Seven? Did he really stay up that long? Just because of Megatron? Jack sighed. Maybe it was just all a dream. Out of habit and to ground himself to reality, he checked his text messages.

None from Arcee.

One from Miko, reporting she would be his morning transportation.

Then an unknown number. **You know what you must do.**

Jack swallowed. Betray his friends, his family, and his country. Or watch them all be destroyed.

He opened up a conversation. **Hey, can you help me with some math homework today?**

Raf replied a couple minutes later. **Sure thing.**

Jack moved on to the next one. **What are you doing after school?**

The reply was instant. **Detention**, Miko answered with an upset emoji.

The student pretended to be disappointed. **That sucks.**

Jack’s heart was heavy as he closed the phone. His friends would hate him forever. If only they all survived this.

That day of school was the longest of his entire life. He fidgeted and bounced his leg anxiously, staring at the window instead of at the chalkboard. He didn’t know what to expect. Knock Out waiting for him in the parking lot, Laserbeak glaring at him, or Megatron coming down from the sky to destroy them all. Or maybe it would be humans, coming in with sirens blaring, knowing what he was planning to do.
None of that happened, but Jack still found himself counting every minute. He practically jumped from his seat when the last bell finally rung. He kept his head low as he pushed his way through the crowded halls, too aware that there were too many eyes. He forced himself to calm down as he fumbled to open his locker.

He texted Raf to meet in one of the back rooms of the library, used for study groups. It wasn’t suspicious—the boys usually met there for his math tutoring sessions. It was retrieving Miko that would be a challenge. Jack had to be creative the next thirty minutes, pretending to be preoccupied while trying to kill the time. He had to wait until most of the students filed out of the school, until only a handful of teenagers and staff remained.

He gave a sigh of relief when he walked through the empty halls without the pressure of warm bodies. Jack made it to the dean’s office without incident, peering into the door’s narrow window. He wasn’t surprised to see the usual suspects: Vince’s little sidekick, the girl that attempted to cheat on Jack’s test more than once (he didn’t know why, he wasn’t that smart), and of course, Miko.

While the others looked like they were about to die from boredom, the girl was preoccupying herself with drawing. The coast clear of deans and teachers (that was a first), Jack gently knocked on the window. It turned a couple heads, rewarding him a glare from Vince’s friend (oh, what was his name) and an excited squeal from Miko. Jack gave an inviting wave and the Japanese girl didn’t hesitate to leap from her seat. The other detainees made faces as she made her escape.

“What are you doing here?” Miko asked as she shut the door behind her. “I figured Raf gave you a ride home.”

“Raf’s here,” Jack assured.

“Oh, you two doing your math club thing again?”

“It’s not a club. And no, it’s—ugh, just come on.”

Nerves getting the best of him, the boy took a hold of his friend’s wrist and proceeded to half-usher, half-drag her across the school. Miko let out a squeak but didn’t protest the manhandling. The library was practically barren when they arrived, only a librarian on sentry duty and a student with her head stuck in a book. Raf was patiently waiting in the study room, math homework already spread out across the table. Miko groaned.

“You are making me join your stupid club,” the exchange student complained. Even Raf looked confused.

“I thought you had detention today?” he inquired with a tilt of his head.

“I’m skipping, duh,” Miko explained.

“Skipping is what got you detention in the first place,” Jack couldn’t help but comment. Miko immediately protested, going back to her story that it was Sierra’s fault. The eldest teen merely muttered, only to feel a buzz from his pocket. He opened his phone, to see a message glaring at him. “What is taking so long?”

Jack gulped, practically hearing Megatron’s demanding growl behind it. Unable to think of a reply, the boy merely closed his phone. Miko was already bored, crossing her arms.

“What is taking so long?”

“I thought you had detention today?” she drawled impatiently.
Jack sighed, realizing he would have to face what he was dreading all night. He gathered whatever courage he had left before it failed him. It was hard, when he was trying to force down the iron weight of guilt. They would never forgive him for this. Megatron said he couldn’t tell the Autobots anything. He never said anything about their human companions. With that futile assurance, Jack told them.

“This is a prank, right?” Miko questioned skeptically.

“What? No!” Jack protested. “Guys, I’m serious!”

“How did the ‘Cons get the key to the base? I thought you said you didn’t say anything!”

“I said I didn’t remember!”

“How do you not remember!”

“I don’t know, maybe because I was in a fragging coma?”

“And now it suddenly just came to you?” Miko shrieked.

“Well, it helped when Megatron threw it in my face with a ‘I’m gonna kill everyone you know and love’ package!” Jack yelled back.

“Stop it!” Raf’s voice wailed, cutting off their argument.

The bickering teens clipped their mouths shut and turned to the fourteen-year-old boy. Guilt took Jack in a vice grip as he saw his friend’s hurt expression. He knew Raf was sensitive. He caught on to that when he once picked up the Hispanic boy up from his home, only to hear the shrill, rapid-fire Spanish of his mother. Followed by a noise that suspiciously sounded like a plate shattering. Raf merely acted like nothing happened, but Jack knew better.

“Jack, is it true?” the freshman asked, his voice almost in a whine. Jack swallowed down that bubble of a sob in his throat.

“Yes,” he forced out. “The ‘Cons know the location of the base, and Megatron’s going to attack the Autobots if I don’t do what he wants.”

“And what does he want?” Miko demanded. Jack purposefully left that part out.

“Information,” he answered.

“That’s specific.”

Clenching his jaw, Jack pulled out the Decepticon device. Ignoring Miko’s curious glances, he showed it to Raf. Despite being the youngest, the genius seemed to be the best one to understand alien technology out of the three of them. Jack could already see his inert instinct was kicking in as the teenager stared at the device curiously.

“Megatron said this would do it for me,” Jack explained, ashamed he couldn’t offer a better explanation.

Raf plucked it out of his hand and glanced over it, turning it in his hands. He treated it like a science fair project, not a possible weapon of cyberwarfare.

“Hmm… it could be a storage drive,” the genius guessed. “Or a transmitter.”
Miko tilted her head. “So… Megs wants you to spy on the ‘Bots?”

The army brat almost wished it was that simple. At least he would bear the consequences of his actions alone, instead of dragging his best friends with him.

“No…” he sighed. Raf and Miko merely looked confused.

“Then what?” Raf dared to ask. Jack’s courage was quickly failing.

“Megatron wants information on the U.S. military,” he admitted, each word painful.

He wasn’t surprised that little Raf immediately connected the dots, his eyes going wide as dinner plates. Miko was slower to catch on. She put an annoyed fist on her hip and waved a hand.

“And how does he plan on getting that?” she asked. “It’s not like we can call up the P—”

She froze mid-sentence with a horrified start. Jack waited patiently as his friends simultaneously assaulted them with protests.

“Are you crazy?” Miko screeched.

“It’s impossible!” Raf agreed.

“You don’t think I know that?” Jack retorted.

“Jack, the Pentagon the most secure building in the world,” the Hispanic boy explained.

“I mean, you did mention that, right?” Miko inquired.

“You don’t think I tried?” retorted Jack. “You really think I want to do this?”

“It’s not like it shouldn’t be done,” the youngest persisted. “It can’t be done!”

The eldest stuck his hands in his pockets and slumped his shoulders. “Well, we can’t walk in, or call them up—” he added, glancing at Miko, “but we could try something else…”

Once again the genius was the first to realize Jack’s meaning, eyes going wide. “You want to groundbridge into the Pentagon?”

The army brat shrugged. “Why not?”

“Because they have cameras, guards, security checkpoints…”

“Which is why Miko will be with me.”

“Wait, I’m going?!” Miko yelped.

Jack nodded. “I need someone to back me up.”

“Or go down with you.”

“That, too.”

“And what are you going to do about security?” Raf inquired.

“Yeah,” Miko agreed. “I’ll think they’ll notice the couple of kids walking around. We don’t exactly blend in.”
Jack had already considered that. “Then good thing the marathon’s tomorrow.”

Miko cocked her head. “The what?”

“Every year the Pentagon hosts a race for military members. It starts on the campus, goes around the city, and circles back for the finish line.” “They do that? How do you know that?”

Suddenly an image flashed before Jack’s eyes, watching and cheering as his father trotted by in his track gear. He shoved it down and faced his friends. He thought all night about this. It wasn’t fool-proof, maybe even the opposite, but it was the only way. He told his plan.

“While the police are distracted with overseeing the race tomorrow, we groundbridge—which will be manned by Raf—” Jack gestured to the younger boy. “—into the Pentagon. Miko, you’re on sentry duty, while I figure out how to use this doohickey.” He waved the device in his hand.

“And then what?” Miko demanded.

“We groundbridge out.” Jack pointedly ended at that, but both of his friends glared at him, and he was forced to break. “And then I give Megatron military secrets, somebody figures us out, and we all go to jail for trespassing… espionage… and um, treason.”

Raf slapped a palm to his face. “This is not going to work.”

“Could we just punk Buckethead somehow?” Miko speculated.

“Do you have any better ideas?” Jack demanded. He looked between the younger teens, hands open invitingly. “Feel free to throw them on the table, because I got nothing.” He waited a full minute, and got no reply, merely the blank, conflicted looks of his friends. He dropped his arms to his sides. “That’s what I thought.”

“Jack…” Raf spoke up, hesitantly. “I don’t know about this…”

“Think of it this way—if we get away with this, we’ll be pulling off the greatest heist in history.”

Obviously it wasn’t true, and Raf’s bitten lip showed he did not approve. Miko, however, perked up at the idea.

“So we’ll be like superspies?!” she asked.

“Pretty much.”

“Sweet!”

“On our own country,” Raf pointed out.

“Not my country,” Miko retorted.

The freshman’s shoulders slumped. “Right…”

“Another thing,” Jack spoke up and his friends settled their gazes on him. “We can’t tell the Autobots.”

“Lips are sealed!” Miko promised, even making the motion. Raf looked more conflicted, but it morphed into a determined look.

“O-Okay,” he nodded.

Raf took him home, and not surprisingly, the car ride was terribly awkward and tense. Neither of the boys wanted to talk about what they had just conspired, but their minds were too wrapped up in the idea to change the subject. Bumblebee questioned them several times, desperate enough to blast the radio at Jack, but neither broke. Raf seemed to remember and understand the Decepticons’ single condition quite clearly.

It surprised Jack. He fully expected the Hispanic boy to tell then and there. But he didn’t. Remembering how Miko immediately started talking about metal bands with Bulkhead when he arrived, it seemed she wouldn’t spill, either.

Jack’s friends didn’t bail on him. They didn’t hate him. If anything, they were willing to go down with him, for better or for worse. The boy didn’t understand why, when they merely knew each other for a year. Before that, they had completely ignored each other’s existences. Now they were facing the charge of treason and the wrath of an alien warlord together.

He thought there would be a sense of relief when he finally stepped out of the Camaro, but the pressure of a brick still stayed on his chest. Raf didn’t look at the older teen as Bumblebee drove away. Jack couldn’t linger on the observation for long, though, as he noticed something else. There was a solid black Ford sedan resting in his driveway, right next to his mother’s white Honda.

Jack’s skin pricked. It certainly wasn’t his mother’s—they only had one car—and he didn’t recognize it as one of her friends. He cautiously neared the strange sedan, eying it warily. He immediately knew something was wrong. The car was spotless—not as shiny as Knock Out, but lacked any trace of sand of the desert. That was unheard of the vehicles of Jasper.

The hairs on the back of Jack’s neck stood on end. Could it be a Decepticon?

Cybertronians came in all shapes and sizes not just in their true form, but in alternative modes. Especially when they had the ability to mimic the appearance of any machine around them. Megatron had sent Laserbeak to monitor the boy—he would not be surprised if the tyrant summoned one of his troops to be a physical presence.

However, as the teenager neared the vehicle, it did not react to his presence. It was as lifeless as his mother’s car beside it. Jack was not convinced. He stepped closer, enough that he could reach out and touch it. Instead he kicked the tire as hard as he could.

All he got was a shot of pain up his leg. He hissed as he jumped back, braced for the Vehicon to lunge at him. It didn’t.

“Hey, Ugly,” Jack called.

Nothing. It was a stiff ‘Con, that was for sure. Or maybe it was just a car.

Still, the boy squinted at the vehicle as he walked by it. He made his way to the front door of his home, not turning his back to the Ford. It meant he had to walk backwards for a good portion, but at least he knew where he was going. He didn’t even need to look as he wrapped a hand around the handle and twisted. He quickly ducked inside.

Jack’s first instinct was call out for his mother, but then stopped. If the car wasn’t a ‘Con, what if it was an intruder? The teenager tried to reason with himself. Maybe one of Mom’s friends got a new
car. Still, it didn’t explain how clean it was.

Then Jack heard the male voice, coming from the kitchen. His heart jumped to his throat. He recognized that professional tone. What was he doing here?

The teenager slowly, cautiously, neared the kitchen. He paused just behind the corner, muscles tense. He heard Mom’s reply, low and hesitant. Breathing through his nose and closing his eyes, Jack stepped out.

He was greeted with Agent Fowler, sitting comfortably in a chair at the kitchen table. Across from him was Mom, her legs crossed and elbows leaning on the edge of the wood. Two mugs sat between them. While Jack was brooding, both adults perked up at his presence.

“Oh, hey, honey,” Mom greeted cheerily.

“Hello, son,” Fowler said in a friendly tone.

Jack bit the inside of his cheek to keep himself from retorting. He hated being called that. He already had a father.

“Hi, Agent Fowler,” Jack said instead, making his voice sound polite. Then he asked more cautiously, “W-what are you doing here?”

Maybe Fowler knew what he was up to. That the government spied on the teenager’s Google searches from last night and sent the man to arrest him. Instead, the federal agent’s hands stayed on his lap.

“I was just checking on how you were doing,” the man explained.

Jack was taken aback. Fowler cared about him? He thought the liaison only cared about the Autobots, and that was only if they caused trouble and inconvenienced the man. That was usually why he showed up at the base, anyway.

“I’m… I’m fine,” Jack forced out, even though that was not the case. Fowler bought it, because he nodded in approval.

“Good to hear.”

He turned back to face Mom. He eyed the two warily. Why were they sitting so close? Jack sent a questioning look.

“We were just talking about your father,” June explained. Oh, great. Because that made him feel so much better.

“He sounds like a very brave man,” Fowler complimented.

“He was,” Jack grounded out as he neared the pair.

The son settled next to them, but didn’t sit down. He personally had nothing against Fowler, but the presence of a government spook in his home sent uncomfortable sensations across his skin. And it made the Decepticon device heavier in his pocket. Jack unconsciously wrapped his fingers around it to hide its bulk. Fowler was oblivious as June went on.

“Turns out Mr. Fowler was a Ranger, too,” she revealed. That perked up Jack’s interest.

“Why the career change?” he asked, genuinely curious but no more relaxed.
“Just another way to serve my country,” Fowler shrugged.

Jack doubted being a military liaison to alien robots was what he had in mind. It made the military brat wonder just how did the agent end up with the job.

“May I use your restroom?” Fowler asked, turning to June.

“Of course,” Mom allowed. She gestured in its direction. “Just down the hall, to your left.”

The agent murmured his thanks and slipped away. Jack eyed him until he was out of sight.

Once he was assured the man was out of earshot, he hissed, “Why didn’t you tell me he was coming?”

“You said you’d be at school with Raf,” Mom answered with a shrug.

“So you just… sat here… with him?” Jack interrogated. Mom looked over her shoulder, cocking an eyebrow at him.

“There’s nothing wrong with two people talking over a cup of tea. It’s called an adult conversation.”

“You couldn’t do that over the phone?”

“He came to see you, not me.” The woman stood up, taking the empty cups over to the kitchen sink. “You know, how you are coping after… the incident.”

Jack mentally cringed at the sentence. They hadn’t mention his kidnapping since he came home from the hospital, moving on and acting like it never happened (oh, if only that was true). It seemed Mom still wasn’t comfortable wrapping her head around it. She turned on the faucet, raising her voice so she could be heard over the running water.

“So I made us a drink while we waited for you came home,” she explained.

“Yeah, well, I noticed you stopped wearing your ring,” the son accused, pointing at her naked finger. The mother sighed.

“I had to move on sometime, Jack.” Before the boy could retort, she added, “That doesn’t necessarily mean I can’t have a friendly chat with another man.”

Jack merely rolled his eyes and turned around. Noticing the black leather wallet sitting on the table. It wasn’t his mother’s. So it had to be Fowler’s.

The teenager glanced over his shoulder. No sign of the agent, and he heard nothing from the bathroom. Only the sound of Mom washing dishes, her gaze set on her work. The coast clear, Jack swiped up the wallet and flipped it open.

Jeez, how did many cards did one man need? He breezed through them, trying to find something that looked like an ID or a key card. As an agent, Fowler would have access to the government facilities. He had to have some sort of proof of status. Jack went faster as he heard a door swing open. He grabbed two cards with Fowler’s picture and stuck them in his pocket, along with the transmitter. Jack turned around, arms behind his back, as the man stepped into the kitchen.

“Ms. Darby, you make a wonderful cup of tea,” he complimented. Jack cocked an eyebrow as Mom smiled.

“Why, thank you, Bill,” she replied.
Bill? Where did she get “Bill” from Agent Fowler? Jack stared like a deer in headlights while Fowler fixed his coat.

“Well, I should head back to Washington D.C.,” the agent announced. “Got to return the rental before it gets dirty.” He nodded to Jack. “Good to see you on your feet again, Jack. Stay out of trouble now.”

The teenager flinched at the word choice. Oh, he had to know. The boy did not dare move until the front door slammed shut. He immediately glared at his mother.

“I hope you know he’s never coming back here,” he declared. The extra weight in his pocket was just another reason why.

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic,” Mom rolled her eyes, drying her hands.

“Don’t play dumb with me—I know you like military guys.” He pointed in the direction of Fowler’s spotless rental. “Ex-Ranger?”

“I like men with commitment and courage. So what if Bill happens to have those qualities?”

Jack gagged and held a hand to his throat. “I think I just threw up a little,” he choked out. “Yeah, I’m going to my room before I lose my lunch.”

“Just make sure to do your homework!” June called after him as he fled to his sanctuary.

It was the children’s luck that the next day was a Saturday. No school, so it wouldn’t be suspicious if they lingered in the base. They usually spent the weekend with the Autobots, as long as the Decepticons weren’t causing trouble. Today didn’t seem be that case.

The kids had only been in the base for twenty minutes before alarms began to blare. Raf covered his ears at the harsh noise, Miko jumped out her seat, and Jack shrunk. He knew it wasn’t a coincidence that the Decepticons just happened to attack the same day the teenagers committed to their evil plan.

See? Look how easy we’re making it for you.

“Right on!” Miko cheered. “Can I—”

She cut off with a yelp as Jack sent a kick to her shin. He glared and the girl immediately realized her mistake. The Autobots didn’t notice, already surrounding Optimus Prime for a battle plan.

The groundbridge came to life with a high-pitched hum, the tunnel filled with blinding shades of green and blue. The vehicles disappeared with a flash of light. Leaving the kids alone with Ratchet, who watched the monitors like a sentry. Jack swallowed and exchanged glances with his friends, who wore torn, but determined faces.

The next three minutes were the longest of Jack’s life. Then he nodded to Raf, and hoped it was a subtle as he thought. The younger boy nodded back and typed a sequence on his laptop. Without warning, the groundbridge burst to life.

“What in the name of the AllSpark?” Ratchet yelped.

Miko didn’t miss her que. She jumped out of her spot on the couch and flew down the stairs.

“Miko! Wait!” Raf called after her, sounding desperate.
Jack waited a solid five seconds before he tore after her.

“I got her!” he yelled.

The junior made sure to stay a pace behind the sophomore, and out of Ratchet’s reach. The pair was too small and too fast for the old Autobot to catch, anyway. They made it to the groundbridge tunnel in a matter of seconds. The hair on the back of Jack’s neck stood from the intense power that surrounded them.

The boy snatched Miko’s wrist, tugging back gently. She adamantly pushed forward, and they fell through the gate together.
Chapter Notes

This was originally supposed to be all in the same chapter, but I got carried away with the details and split it up into two chapters. But because they are practically the same, I decided to post them both.

Jack never got used to the groundbridge. It always unnerved him. The technology was not simply just teleportation or the manipulation of matter. It was the manipulation of \textit{space and time}. It used so much concentrated energy that it tore a hole in the thin fabric of the continuum, from one spot to another.

The instant means of transportation had no effects on metallic organisms that were practically immortal, but same could not be said for a human. Jack could feel the pull on every cell in his body as he stepped into the portal. He could feel the universe spinning around him, screaming in panic as it rapidly tried to heal the wound in time. The teenager always wondered how many years were took from him, and he always feared he would step out as an old man.

Then there was stepping into another part of the world. Jack would be assaulted by countless sensations of the new environment so brutally that his head spun and his stomach flipped. Today was no exception.

Jack gagged as the sharp scent of sanitizer and paint assaulted his nostrils to the point he could taste it on his tongue. The warm, thin air of the desert was replaced by frigid air conditioning. The blinding light that had swallowed the youth became dull, gray walls. The intense ringing in his ears disappeared with a sharp \textit{pop}.

The teen moaned. He \textit{hated} groundbridging. A second moan beside him told that Miko fared no better. Jack forced himself to stay upright on wobbly legs and blinked several times to adjust his vision. The bowels of the Autobot base were gone. Instead, the walls of the Pentagon surrounded him.

“We’re here,” he announced, quietly, as if he spoke any louder, the wrong person could hear.

The teenagers were in a long corridor, one side made of transparent glass that allowed bright afternoon sunlight to shine through, while the other was made of doors leading to offices and other hallways. The hallway was completely void of people. For now. Jack knew it wouldn’t be that way for long.

“So what’s the next step?” Miko asked.

“We find out what this does,” Jack answered, holding up the drive. It was still as lifeless as before, waiting patiently to bring ruin.

The boy thought. He only been to the Pentagon only once, and that when he had gone a public tour group, under the watchful eyes of the guide and security. And the tour specifically banned access to anything behind locked doors. He looked around, only to freeze.
“What?” Miko demanded, following his gaze out the window.

They were greeted with an expansive view of Washington D.C. Jack’s former home.

The wide Potomac River stretched out before the Pentagon, flowing from one side of the horizon to the other. On the other side of the water, the obelisk of the Washington Monument towered over the city, the white stone shining in the sunlight. Beyond it, both old and modern buildings covered the land as far as the eye could see. The Capitol rose over the buildings, watching over the District from its Hill.

Jack instantly felt the tug in his heart from nostalgia. If he obeyed, he would swim across the freezing river and walk the capital’s streets for hours. If only he had that luxury, and pretended that the downward spiral of his life never happened.

“It must be weird for you, to be back in Washington D.C.,” Miko commented.

“No,” Jack shook his head. “We’re in Virginia. D.C.’s on the other side of the river. But considering my house was in Virginia… yeah, it’s weird.”

Suddenly the teenagers heard a roar. Jack almost flinched, until he recognized the muffled sound. The boy glanced down to confirm they had groundbridged on the third floor of the building.

Below them was the marathon, that would provide their cover. Families and military personnel—and plenty of both local and Pentagon police—amassed on the sides of the road, cheering and waving as soldiers dressed in track gear jogged by. Jack couldn’t help but feel his heart twist, realizing the sight had not changed in three years.

It was originally Mom’s idea for have Dad run in the race, and the son was happy to encourage him. The Ranger agreed, to support his comrades and appease his family’s nagging. The man ended up jogging all twenty-six miles, and gave that participation medal he won to Jack, mostly as a joke. The son still kept it in the safety of his room, untouched.

The teen shook his head to snap out of it. He did not have the luxury to dwell on the past. He was border-lining Megatron’s deadline. He had to get the information. Now.

Jack pulled out his phone and called Raf. Although the young boy couldn’t be with them physically, he had done research much like Jack had, and would be in charge of their cover.

“Ratchet’s mad,” the Hispanic boy answered in warning.

“Why are you whispering?” Jack asked, dropping his voice in the same manner.

“Ratchet’s mad.”

“Does he know where we are?”

“No, I deleted the coordinates. He thinks you guys are where the Autobots are.”

“Where are you?”

“Hiding in the base.”

“Can you walk us through this place, little buddy?” Jack requested.

“Yeah, I have the map uploaded and ready to go,” Raf assured. “What’s your location?”
“The north face,” Jack answered immediately. “By the river. Looking at the Washington Monument right now.”

“Okay,” Raf mused and the older teen heard the furious tapping of a keyboard. “If you need to download data into the drive, you probably need to directly connect it to the defense network.”

“That sounds easy,” Miko chirped, overhearing as she practically leaned on Jack’s shoulder. “We just plug it into a computer and we’re out of here!”

“Not exactly.”

“What do you mean?” Jack asked.

“A computer’s access could be limited to just the user’s access,” the freshman explained. “Someone of a lower clearance may not carry the same data as someone from the top.” Jack nodded in thought, understanding, even though the freshman couldn’t see him. “If you want to see the entire network, you’ll need to find the mainframe.”

Jack didn’t like where this was going, but asked anyway, “Where’s that?”

“Server room. In the basement.”

The military brat’s shoulder’s sagged. Great. It was always the basement. Like nothing bad ever happened there.

“Then we need to find an elevator,” the junior realized.

“There should be one near your location.”

Jack said his gratitude and hung up. Better to keep communications as short as possible. He’ll call Raf if he needed the genius’s help again, and the freshman knew to call back if he found new information. Miko was already bouncing on her heels when Jack turned to her, either in excitement or anxiousness. Probably both.

“So what’s the plan?” she asked.

“We’re on the wrong floor,” Jack answered. “Let’s go.”

With that, he led the way, Miko trailing behind him. It was slow going. The pair had only walked ten paces before voices drifted from around the corner. Then teens naturally jumped, even bumping into each other in blind panic, before Jack noticed the janitor’s closest next to them. By some miracle, it wasn’t locked, and he shoved Miko inside as she let out a startled squeak. The boy kept the door open by a millimeter as he peered out, only to see a pair of armed security guards. It was only because they were deep in conversation they did not notice the teens.

The coast clear, the kids stepped out of their hiding place, only to repeat the process several more times. Without warning, either guards, personal, or once a general would appear, and the pair was sent scrambling to the nearest hiding place.

“I thought you said everyone would be at the race,” Miko hissed as their chests were pressed together, which was an uncomfortable experience for the both of them. They hid in behind a pillar, out of sight as a blonde analyst with wiry glasses walked by.

“I said most people would be at the race,” Jack retorted in a harsh whisper.
The clanking heels of the woman faded away and the two went limb with a relieved gasp of breath. They continued on, only to come to a double metal door. With an electronic lock.

“Now what do we do?” Miko whined.

“Good thing I always come prepared,” Jack replied in a confident tone. He pulled out Fowler’s ID card, amused as his friend’s eyes widened to the size of dinner plates.

“Where did you get that?”

“Agent Fowler gave it to me.”

“…Sure.”

With a mischievous grin, Jack swiped the white plastic card along the box beside the door. The red light turned green with an approving ring, and the two slipped through. But as they traveled further, the army brat was getting more and more anxious by the minute. It was only a matter of time before someone spotted them, or noticed them on the cameras. It was a miracle they weren’t discovered already.

The pull on his heart worsened with each step. The paranoia heightened at each corner, to that he was looking over his shoulder even though he knew no one was there. He was actually going through with this. He was here, in the state he once called home, and for all the wrong reasons. He was at the Pentagon, set on his suicidal mission. Part of him wanted to succeed. Part of him wanted to get caught. He didn’t want to spend his life in federal prison. He didn’t want to help Megatron.

“Jeez, this place is a maze,” Miko complained, breaking him out of his thoughts.

“Well, it wouldn’t be the military if they made it easy,” Jack commented.

“So where the heck is this elevator?”

Just as she finished her question, Jack skidded to a halt, even pausing mid-stride with his leg still in the air.

“Right here.” He turned to his left to step into an alcove, which, sure enough, had a pair of elevators. He approached the silver door, twisting the plastic in his hands in his anxiety. “I just hope Fowler’s access card works.”

“Oh, please, it’s not like he’s here,” Miko drawled.

She just had to say something. Both teens froze like a deer in headlights and exchanged horrified gazes as a familiar shout drifted from around the corner.

“This is ridiculous!” Fowler’s voice came, raised in frustration. “Twelve years I’ve worked at the Pentagon, and I have to walk around a damn visitor badge.”

“Do you have any idea where you left your access card?” a second voice, male, asked.

“It doesn’t make a lick of sense! I had it in my wallet, where I keep it like always. Then it just—” There was a snap of fingers. “—vanishes in thin air!”

By panic was filling the interlopers’ veins.

“What do we do?” Miko squeaked. “There’s nowhere to hide!”
Fowler and his companion’s voices were drawing nearer, and Jack now could hear the steady *clacking* of dress shoes on tile. He rapidly looked back and forth, only to confirm his friend’s words. There were another pair of doors with another lock, but it was a good ten-yard distance. He and Miko would have to sprint over, unlock the door, and slip through the threshold when Fowler was just around the corner. If he didn’t see them, he would definitely hear them. It was a risk they would have to make.

With a hiss, Jack leaped into a mad dash toward the doors, Miko right on his heels. He skidded to a halt, his sneakers making a loud *squeaking* noise. He cringed, but had no time to dwell on it as he fumbled to get a grip on Fowler’s “borrowed” access card. Miko’s panicked nagging wasn’t helping. Jack was already pulling on the door handle when the lock buzzed, and the pair slipped through.

The same moment Fowler and a military officer appeared where they had just been standing.

Both men were dressed sharp. Fowler, who usually wore a disheveled suit to the Autobot outpost, was dressed in an ironed black suit. It was buttoned up to his chest, hiding most of his plump belly. His white undershirt rose to a high collar, held in place by a black tie. If Jack could speak to the man, he would make a *Men in Black* joke.

Jack instantly recognized the other man was wearing the Army service uniform, just like his dad used to wear. A pitch-black blazer—not a button out of place—over straight, low waist army blue trousers, ending at a pair of polished combat boots. A large array of service ribbons rested above the man’s chest, and the gold-trimmed insignia of a star was sewed on top of his shoulder. A lieutenant colonel.

The man must have just been promoted to the rank, because he looked in his younger years. Brown hair was cut short to his scalp and his hazel eyes were alert. His were smooth and shaven, just like Fowler’s.

“Well, good news is,” the military commander was saying, “we just have this debriefing for the day.”

Fowler groaned.

“SecDef hasn’t batted the Autobots an eye since he came to office,” the federal agent complained. “And when we come to him with a problem, he’s suddenly all over it.”

“He’s a busy man,” the military officer shrugged as he typed on the keypad beside the elevator. On the last digit, the military officer leaned forward, allowing a beam of light to scan his eye. The elevator opened with a *ding* and Fowler moved to board, only to be cut off by the other man’s arm. “Sorry, no visitors beyond this point.”

“I will shoot you, Lennox,” Fowler growled menacingly. “Don’t think for a second I won’t.”

The lieutenant colonel, Lennox, merely chuckled at the threat and the pair slipped inside the elevator. It wasn’t until the silver doors slid close that Miko and Jack stepped back out into the hallway.

“Whew, that was a close one,” the sophomore gasped.

“Tell me about it,” Jack agreed as he scanned their surroundings. Coast was clear. “Come on.”

He jogged back to the elevator, Miko reluctantly following on his heels.

“Wait, we’re just going to use the same elevator Fowler just took?” she demanded.

“There’s more than one floor, Miko,” Jack explained. “I highly doubt Fowler’s going to the server
“And how are we going to get to the server room?” The girl pointed at the circular glass dome next to the elevator.

Jack’s stomach twisted at the retinal scanner. It didn’t help that it required a code to activate, as well. He doubted an access card could unlock that. But they couldn’t risk going look for another elevator. They were short on time, and it was a miracle they hadn’t been caught already. Which meant it was only a matter of time until the teens were discovered. The Decepticon device felt heavy in Jack’s hand.

“You will use this device to assist you in your task.”

What did Raf say it was? A transmitter? Transmitting what? They didn’t even had access to the network yet—they couldn’t even access an elevator. Jack never heard of a virus being downloaded via signal. Then the boy thought. Cybertronians had the ability to mimic any technology. He doubted they could replicate a human eyeball, but...

The junior eyed the key slot next to the keypad. A manual override? Jack held out the device.

“What are you doing?” Miko asked.

The older teenager didn’t have the chance to answer as suddenly there was a sound of transformation. Jack’s widened and Miko’s mouth gaped when the end of the device turned into the shape of a key. The boy swallowed.

“Here goes nothing,” he sighed, inserting the device in the override slot.

The doors opened.

Jack stepped out into the hallway, slowly, cautiously. Unlike the pristine paint of upstairs, the subterranean walls were a drab gray, lifeless. The white fluorescent lights were too harsh and blinding. The air was even colder than upstairs, enough that Jack even shivered for a brief moment. He wondered if he could see his breath if he stayed down here long enough.

“Wow, this place is in serious need of an interior designer,” Miko commented.

Jack ignored her as he picked a direction. They were in a long hallway, no offices or people in sight. To the left, the hallway cut off abruptly into a corner and to the right, it continued on to a pair of metal—no doubt locked—doors. The junior picked left.

He pressed his back to the wall and carefully peered an eye around the edge. Another long, empty hallway. Whatever god was watching over him, he was grateful. Jack waved an all-clear to Miko and moved on.

The hallway branched off a couple times, but Jack didn’t trust himself to take a detour. He couldn’t risk running into someone patrolling the halls, or getting lost. Every hallway looked the exact same—dull walls and bright lights. Instead, the pair followed the corridor to another pair of sealed doors.

At first, Jack was tempted to use Fowler’s key card. Then he realized it might be risky. On the surface were the main offices, where Fowler apparently worked and it was only natural he was allowed to navigate the entire building. The teenager wondered if that access included the top-secret
bunker. But he had something that did work. Even if it didn’t make him feel any better.

Jack skimmed the walls and found the manual override. Like before, the Decepticon device transformed to a perfect fit and let out a high-pitched buzz as it invaded the security systems. The doors opened.

“That thing is so cool!” Miko gawked.

Jack said nothing, his stomach twisting. He knew Cybertronian technology was out of human comprehension, but the device’s abilities seemed too convenient. Like Megatron knew what kind of troubles the human would be facing.

The kids walked further, Jack alert and scanning for anything that might come after them. He did not tell Miko he had seen at least twenty cameras since they arrived, over half of them staring directly at the interlopers. But there were no security guards that came for them. And for some reason, Jack had a feeling that wasn’t a mistake.

*We are watching you.*

The corridor came to another end, this time splitting off into two opposite directions. Jack stayed left and he almost missed it. There was a lone, gray metal door, with a particular sign next to it.

**SERVER ROOM**

“Well, that’s convenient,” Jack commented. He inserted the device in the keyhole. It unlocked as easily as all the others. No buzz, no alarms, no guards. “That’s also convenient.”

The server room was what the boy always saw in the movies. Rows and rows of black, sleek server towers filled up a space that was the size of his high school gym. There was just enough room between the towers for a single person to squeeze through, and no more. The frigid air was filled with the hum of machinery and the buzzing of electric wiring.

Jack’s heart was pounding in his ears. There was no turning back now. He actually made it. All he had to do was use the drive, and go home. Knowing he was a traitor. As the boy slowly, painfully, trudged to the nearest tower, he could feel his father’s betrayed spirit.

*You don’t have a choice,* the teen told himself. His knuckles were white around the device. *Megatron will kill everyone you know, and he will do it.*

But what was stopping him from doing that anyway? Well, he honored their earlier agreement, even though it included torturing the human to the brink of death.

The server tower had a monitor and a small keyboard, probably to manually manipulate the data. Next to it was a USB port. Jack glanced down at the device. If it could transform into a key…

A part of Jack realized he could walk away. A part of him realized that he couldn’t.

The teenager held the device next to the port. There was a whirring sound and the object transformed, once again into a perfect fit.

Jack swallowed. The Autobots would hate him for betraying their greatest secret. The world would hate him for selling them out. Either way, his soul was damned to a monster.

*You will obey my will.*
The army brat inserted the device.

There was a high-pitched whirr that spread from the device all the way to the machine. Jack and Miko leaped back with yelps as electricity pulsed from the drive. Without warning, the monitor flashed to life in a purple hue. Jack’s stomach twisted as a browser popped up on the screen. Then another and another and another, until the number of pried-open files doubled by the second, appearing on the monitor at an impossible speed. At the same time, data scrolled across the screen at a dizzying rate. Jack tried to follow along and was only rewarded with a vicious headache and a churning stomach. He only saw snippets of images.

“Sector Seven?” he read out loud in a murmur, only for the file to disappear and be replaced by another.

“What’s Project Iceman?” Miko asked.

“Whatwicky Expedition?”

None of the files seemed to have any relevance to each other, to the point Jack questioned if he was reading it right. It was too fast… The drive was whirring louder and louder as the data was scanned faster and faster.

Thousands and thousands of gigabytes, and the evil little device was scrolling through it all in a matter of seconds. Jack estimated it would only take a few minutes for the Decepticons to scan the entire military network.

The junior jumped sky-high and Miko let out a yelp as suddenly a high-pitched, siren-like sound blared all around them. Warning, red lights flashed. Jack’s stomach flipped with horror. The security alarm.

“Oh, is that supposed to happen?!” Miko yelled over the deafening noise, hands covering her ears. Even Jack was wincing at the volume. Why did—

The boy realized. Of course, it was the Pentagon. Even their encryptions had encryptions. No doubt they had some security measure that if the firewall was ever breached, the military could defend themselves against a cyber-attack. Not even Cybertronian technology could fool that, or hide the massive amounts of data that it was stealing. Unable to stop it, the technicians must have pulled the switch on the entire building.

“What I require can only be accessed by a human,” Megatron had said.

Jack’s blood turned to ice when he finally realized what the warlord meant. The Decepticons could easily hack into the network—but not without attracting unwanted attention. Apparently Megatron didn’t want to sacrifice one of his troops—but he had no qualms could sacrificing an insect. The Decepticon leader wanted the human to succeed, and wanted him to take the fall.

“Megatron set us up,” Jack realized. Without a second thought, the military brat wrapped his fingers around the device, which was still sucker up knowledge. He pulled, but it did not budge, like it was glued to the mainframe.

“Now what do we do?” Miko cried.

Jack didn’t reply as he grounded his teeth, pulling harder. Still the transmitter did not disconnect. Placing a heel on the tower for leverage, the boy yanked with all his might. He felt the muscles in his shoulders pull just as the device came free with an electronic scream of protest. The monitor froze as the download ceased.
Jack yelped as he was sent back by his own momentum, his back crashing into the servers behind. Miko stepped forward to help him, but the teenager was already moving.

“Run!”
William Fowler shifted nervously in his cushioned seat. It was considerably more comfortable than being in a Boeing-17, but he sat with the restlessness of a soldier, braced to jump to his feet at a moment’s notice. In his Ranger days, he had seen his fair share of action: being behind enemy lines, jumping out of airplanes, and flying a Raptor way too close to the ground. But he knew how to respond accordingly.

However, being surrounded by top government officials, several of them being his superiors, Fowler found his palms sweating. At least Lieutenant Colonel William Lennox was to his right, under the same scrutiny, and that they sat at a conference table. Instead of a defense table on trial.

To Fowler’s left was his superior, a man in his late forties with a number of ribbons that put his own collection to shame—General Bryce. But instead of directing his attention at him, his focus was on another figure. Directly in front of the federal agent, pinning him down with piercing stone eyes, was the Secretary of Defense.

Salt-and-pepper hair, defined features, back straight, and his glare undeterred by wiry glasses, the man looked an experienced general. Former one, at least. The Secretary carried himself with the authority of the head of the United States military.

“Thank you for coming in on such short notice, gentlemen,” the man said. As if they had a choice. “General Bryce, I understand you are in command of NEST?”

“Yes, sir,” the general hummed obediently.

Spending most of his time confined to a desk instead of a field, the man was more on the plump side, but he still held himself tall and proud. No troublesome hair, broad shoulders, stern features. The Secretary squinted at the piece of paper in his hands.

“Who is the field commander of operations?” he interrogated.


The Secretary’s gaze reminded Fowler of a hawk at it settled on him. “And you would be…?”


“So then, would any of you know about the arms deal bust last week, where we discovered thirty million dollars worth of alien tech?” The man dropped the file on the table. “Well, black market price, anyway.”

Fowler gulped, painfully. He subtly looked to his partners. Lennox had a solemn expression, but was wringing his hands in nervousness. Bryce looked like a stone statue.

“According to the Alien-Autobot Cooperation Act,” a second voice spoke up, “we share intelligence and tactics, but not their weaponry. Mind explaining that to me?”

Fowler glanced to see a man sitting next to the Secretary, dressed in a flashy black suit. His pitch-black hair was cut short and wiry glasses balanced precariously on his nose. The liaison remembered
his name. Theodore Galloway, National Security Advisor to the President. Or, that was what he was supposed to be. It was Bryce that answered.

“NEST is a joint military force made up of U.S. military and the Autobots,” the general explained. “There has to be a degree of trust between us. But the Autobots will not share their technology, because its way more advanced than ours… and destructive.”

The man pointedly cut it off at that. Fowler remembered Prime’s comment once, that he would not hand over their weaponry because he knew there were humans that would abuse it. The alien may have had respect for the significantly smaller and younger species, but he was not blind to mankind’s destructive nature. Galloway’s jaw clenched, revealing that he did not agree with the sentiment.

“Don’t you think that’s a little unfair?” the man accused. “They have all the big guns, and we have nothing to defend ourselves. And obviously they are violating the act, because how else would the weapons get in possession of the extremists?”

“Sir,” Lennox dared to speak up. “You forgot about the… other faction.”

“Right…” the Secretary mused as he picked up another random file. “De-cept-i-cons? Led by Megalord, or something.”

“Mega-tron,” Lennox corrected quickly. Heaven forbid a human muddled a Cybertronian’s name.

“According to our files, Sector Seven labeled him ‘NBE-1’ as part of their… ‘Project Iceman,’” Galloway reviewed.

Fowler felt Lennox tense beside him at the name of the shadowy organization. The agent couldn’t blame him. In the colonel’s eyes, Sector Seven was responsible, albeit indirectly, for the three hundred soldiers whose lives were lost. Sector Seven could have warned that the Earth was slowly being invaded by hostile aliens, but kept those secrets for themselves.

“Sector Seven was disbanded, sir,” Lennox ground out. For a good reason. Sector Seven had been hoarding Cybertronian relics for decades, including the Lord of the Decepticons himself, reverse-engineering their technology in the name of the ‘advancement of mankind.’ Even the Autobots were abhorred by the experiments, which was the worse than torture in their point-of-view. Not only were they done on troublesome Decepticons, but friendly Autobots.

To learn what secrets Sector Seven was hiding, and to prevent a full-scale war, Congress signed an act to force the organization to hand over all their intelligence and their “borrowed” weaponry. It pleased the Autobots enough for the extra-terrestrials to agree to a peace treaty, but unfortunately the other set of aliens were not as forgiving.

Still, Fowler doubted the Decepticons would willingly trade with humans, even outlaws. Megatron’s bitter hatred towards mankind was no secret. Plus it was not in his nature. He chose war over peace any day.

“Replaced by Non-biological Extraterrestrial Species Treaty—NEST,” the Secretary recalled. “And according to the treaty, the Autobots are only to cooperate with U.S. military forces, they are not to interact with any civilians.” If only they knew that went out the window real quick. “They are to assist us in eradicating any Decepticons, but not to surrender any of their technology or weaponry.”

“And we have been successful with that, sir,” Lennox defended before there would be any accusations thrown. “In the last three years alone, NEST has responded to eighteen Decepticons
“Pardon me for interrupting,” Galloway interjected, leaning forward, with a hasty tone that told he was not sorry. “When NEST was originally founded, you reported there was no threat to the human population. No Decepticon to speak of,” he added, cutting a hand through the air.

Fowler wanted to interject himself, correcting the advisor misread the report. When NEST was formed, the Decepticons were still licking their wounds from their humiliating defeat. They were quiet for the first few months. Planning a counterattack.

“Two years ago, you had two Decepticon incursions within a six-month period,” Galloway continued. “Correct?”

“Correct,” Bryce nodded.

“And now, in the last year alone, there has been twelve confrontations between our U.S. forces and this menace.” He fixed the NEST representatives with a demanding glare. “Why is that?”

“Megatron,” Lennox answered. “The last time U.S. ground forces encountered him was in Mission City. An air strike I called in—”

“An air strike in civilian air space.”

Lennox swallowed. “…Yes. The air strike and suppressive fire from the Autobots left him critically damaged. He disappeared from all surveillance, and so did the Decepticons. Without their leader, the ‘Cons were left unorganized and scattered.” The colonel explained it slowly and clearly, like he was introducing a concept to children. Or he was tired of repeating the same script for the umpteenth time. “In the winter of last year… he came back. Ever since, attacks on human facilities has significantly increased.”

“I don’t understand,” Galloway squinted, not digesting a single word that the colonel had said. “Why would he just up and leave Earth… and then ‘come back’?”

Fowler could see Lennox reaching for patience.

“He was critically dam—” the colonel repeated, only to be cut off.

“No, no, I got that,” the security advisor snapped, shifting in his seat in agitation. “Why did he return to Earth?”

It was the NEST representatives’ turn to stare. Fowler knew Megatron had fled to deep space after his retreat. While the agent wanted to remain optimistic that was the end of it, the Autobots suspected the warlord was planning a counterattack. When they found remnants of his followers on Earth, Optimus was convinced that the Decepticons never left the planet at all. Fowler opened his mouth to say such, but never got the opportunity.

“There’s only one clear conclusion,” Galloway claimed. “The Autobots!” When he only received dumbstruck expressions, he elaborated. “The Decepticons are here only because their sworn enemies are here. They are here to hunt Autobots.”

Fowler immediately bristled at the venomous, accusing tone, and he felt Lennox and even General Bryce was sitting a little straighter. They hadn’t been called here to give an explanation. They had been called her to find someone to blame.

“With all due respect, we have been fighting side-by-side with the Autobots for years,” Lennox
grounded out defensively, but kept his voice level and calm.

“Lieutenant colonel, you’ve been paid to shoot, not play poker with your space buddies.”

Lennox’s jaw clenched, muttering under his breath, “Don’t tempt me…”

“At this point, this… Meg-a-tron has done more for us than the Autobots have!” Galloway said, leaning back in his chair while waving a hand. “It was reverse engineering his schematics that advanced our technology to become the modern world we know today. And the Autobots? They refuse to trade anything. They have given us nothing, but dead soldiers.”

Never in Fowler’s entire life did he want to punch someone. Galloway had become security advisor to the new president after the Act had been written. He was reading words off of documents, most of them written years ago. He had no interest in reading up-to-date reports, or even eye-witness testimonies. He had been sent to read the facts, and determine if it was a threat to national security. But he was reading the wrong facts.

True, Megatron had been captive of the U.S. government for a hundred years, ever since Captain Archibald Witwicky discovered his frozen body in the Artic Circle, and then transported to the States thirty years later. He was Sector Seven’s treasured “Project Iceman.” Their understanding of the universe broadened greatly and technology have been advanced by fifty-to-a-hundreds years, maybe more. But the very thing that had created the human’s modern day, was the very thing that could destroy it.

Megatron was nothing short of an egotistical megalomaniac. He was vengeful and held bitter grudges, that he didn’t let go even after the debt had already been paid. He had every intention to make all of humanity pay for his humiliation, and he used it as another reason to crush the Autobots, who had allied with his captors.

“I mean, have we even bothered to communicate with these Decepticons?” Galloway inquired.

“Sir, you are not actually suggesting of negotiating with the enemy?” Bryce interjected, his tone filled with disapproval.

“Terms of surrender have to be written somehow.”

The Decepticons? Surrender? Oh, Fowler could hear Megatron’s bellowing laughter. That is, if the intergalactic warlord didn’t destroy the entire envoy for utterly insulting him.

“Apparently someone else has already jumped the gun,” the Secretary finally spoke up. He had watched the entire exchange with watchful eyes and attentive ears, but he was still not deviated from their original concern. “Is there any reason to believe the Decepticons would trade with humans?”

“Not a chance, sir;” Fowler answered quickly, grateful to speak to another audience. “The Decepticons hate our guts with a passion. They would never share their technology.”

“I don’t want to believe NEST is at fault, but if I have to investigate.” Fowler recognized that false polite tone that was used too many times by politicians being interviewed on live TV. “There are protocols in place that after an incursion, all Cybertronian salvage is removed from the premises. If there are alien relics on the black market, that weren’t given to us, then I have to believe these protocols were failed to be followed correctly.”

Fowler and Lennox exchanged uneasy glances. Fowler kept his mouth such as the lieutenant colonel dared to speak up.
“As field commander, I can assure you that all protocols were upheld when NEST forces are on scene,” the man said, trying to word his explanation as carefully as possible. Apparently it wasn’t careful enough, because Galloway jumped on it like a lion pouncing on a gazelle.

“What do you mean by ‘when you are once scene’?” the security advisor demanded. Lennox swallowed and rubbed the back of his neck, uncomfortable underneath the multiple gazes settled on him.

“The Autobots…” he started, less confident than before, “are like teenaged kids. They like to sneak out of the house every once in a while.”

No one at the table seemed convinced. Fowler tried not to show any reaction. The Autobots were specifically instructed to keep the Pentagon up-to-date on their activities—it was why Fowler had his job in the first place. If possible, they were to contact NEST forces for support. However, sometimes the situation didn’t always allow that, especially if time was of the essence. And the Transformers still didn’t understand the nature of human bureaucracy.

Fowler told Optimus Prime to be more discreet, or at the very least, inform the man when there was going to be problem. Unfortunately, if the Autobot leader did decide to update the liaison, it was usually after the fact.

“You are in control of the Autobots, are you not?” Galloway interrogated Lennox.

The man grew silent, knowing if he said anything, it would incriminate him. It was harder to manipulate the conversation into his favor when several hard gazes were boring into him.

“Team Prime exists as its own independent entity,” the colonial explained. “NEST was formed as part of the joint military alliance, but the Autobots are considered a foreign power. By the terms of the treaty, we are not to assume any command over Optimus Prime, their leader.”

“So you don’t have control over them,” the advisor accused. Apparently that was the only thing he understood from that description.

“Well, we do, to an extent, but——” Lennox fumbled.

“Should an emergency occur,” the authoritative voice of General Bryce interrupted, “the Autobots have the right to react in any way they see fit.”

“Even if it means violating the treaty?” Galloway demanded. It was Bryce that opened his mouth to retort, but the man beat him to it as he turned to Fowler. “Your job is to monitor the Autobots and report directly to your superiors.”

“I am a liaison,” Fowler corrected. “I liaise. I don’t spy on the Autobots.”

“But you volunteered for the job! After they killed your brother, Anthony Fowler.”

Something hot raced up Fowler’s spine and for a brief moment he went stiff as red flashed across his vision. He curled his fingers into a fist until his knuckles became pale. Through the haze, he saw Lennox give the smallest wince and Bryce merely eyed him. Immediately the ex-Ranger tried to force the spell of rage down, pressing his hands to the table.

It took every ounce of his willpower to force out in a low, level tone, “The Decepticons killed my baby brother.”

“Then how do we know your personal opinion isn’t interfering with your judgement?”
Fowler opened his mouth to tell the cocky bastard off, but never had the chance.

The security alarm went off.

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Jack sprinted down the maze-like hallways, Miko hot on his heels. What had been disorienting corridors before now were impossible to navigate. Especially as the shouts of furious guards echoed off the concrete walls. The teenagers had originally tried to go back the way they came, only to be halted by the stampede of boots on tile. They had been greeted with the same sound with every escape route they turned to, and the boy could hear the shouts drawing nearer.

“We are so fragged!” he gasped.

He didn’t know if the police knew who they were looking for. Part of him doubted they knew they had been infiltrated by a couple of technology-advanced high school students. But security knew there was a breach, and by the sounds of it, they knew it was in the basement.

One too many times, Jack glanced down a hallway to see the silhouette for a frantic guard, and he prayed they didn’t see him, even though he knew it was futile. He did not dare look behind him. One shout, that sounded particularly like a call of attention, sounded too close when Jack turned a corner. He had so much momentum, he slid across the ground, having to fall on all fours to catch himself, only to immediately leap back into a sprint.

Jack’s instinct was to call Raf for a groundbridge—but he knew it was pointless. They were underground and surrounded by solid concrete—there was no signal, and the junior didn’t want to stop and check. And by some miracle there was a groundbridge, there was a high risk that the kids’ pursuers could see it, if they didn’t fall through after them.

“Jack, look!” Miko’s shout suddenly interrupted him. He skidded to a halt, following her pointed finger at a fire escape sign, with a stick figure running up stairs beneath it. Next to it, was a metal door, no doubt leading to a staircase. “Es-cap-eh.”

Jack didn’t hesitate to tear through the door first, throwing it open. He took two steps at a time, clearing the staircase in seconds. The boy forced himself to take a breath he did not he was holding to as he stepped onto the first floor—on the surface. There were no furious shouts of guards, but sirens still wailing. They were far from out of the woods.

The intruder took slow, cautious steps down the hallway, scanning back and forth for any threats. He tried to control his breathing, but every time he slowed his panting, his lungs demanded for more air. A gasping Miko beside him told that she was no better.

“Now where are we?” the Japanese girl panted.

“I don’t know…” Jack murmured scanning his surroundings. Everything looked the same— “We have to find some place to open up a groundbridge.”

He would take a broom closest at this point. The boy glanced out the window to notice the late afternoon sun as it descended towards the horizon, blanketing the city landscape with a fiery light. Apparently they had come up on the west side. The army brat froze. Wait. The west side.

No, no, not here. Not here. Jack remembered how he and his friends were dragged along with the tour group. How quickly the bored and fascinated faces turned somber, while Jack had a full-out panic attack. He practically had to be carried to the nurse. He hated war, and he hated death even
“This is where the plane hit,” he realized with horror, in a barely audible whisper.

“What?” Miko asked, not hearing. Even though, she stepped closer to her friend as Jack tried to control his breathing. His heart rate was already cranking up. He was already on the verge of hyperventilating, and he tried to pull himself from falling over the edge.

“My… my uncle died here,” he forced out, unable to say anything else. He saw the girl’s eyes widened, and he realized he never told her about that. How he hated this place. He shut his eyes tight and opened them. Spots danced across his vision. “We need to get out of here.”

Without waiting for a response, he dashed away. Miko yelped after him before following on his heels. The boy sprinted fifty feet bloody roaring in his ears, until he forced himself to calm down. He slowed to a walk, Miko almost ramming into him from his sudden halt.

Shoulder heaving, Jack moved to step into another hallway, only to hear the pounding of boots and the rattling of gear. He pushed his friend back as he recoiled—just as a squadron of Pentagon police officers sprinted by. Apparently they weren’t overseeing the race anymore.

The boy kept his eyes trained on the retreating forms of the guards as he stepped out of his hiding place, turning in the opposite direction. Only to ram into something solid and unmoving. Jack wheezed as he ricocheted back, holding his nose in discomfort. Miko let out a high-pitched squeak.

The army brat glanced up at the obstacle, only for his heart to stop.

It was that lieutenant colonel Fowler was with. He stared down at the children with a cocked eyebrow in a twisted, puzzled expression.

“How the hell did you two get back here?” he interrogated, sounding more confused than hostile.

Jack opened his mouth to speak, to say something—to confess, to lie, to make up an excuse—anything. Instead, his throat closed up and no sound came out. He was rooted to the spot; Miko for once did not dare move. That was until a familiar figure slipped into view.

“Lennox, what is it?” Fowler asked, coming up from behind his friend. He stopped dead at the sight of teenagers and a flurry of expressions passed over his face in a single second—puzzlement, anger, annoyance, then straight-faced. Finally he settled on a long groan, slapping his palm to his face “I just can’t get away from you, can I?”

“Wait, you know these kids?” Lennox asked.

“Unfortunately.”

“We’re not kids,” Jack interjected, hating how the men were talking like they found a couple of lost ten-year-olds.

“Zip it,” Fowler snapped. The boy quickly clipped his mouth shut. He scanned over them, then blinked and shook his head when he did a double take. “Wait, there’s three of you. Where’s the shrimp?”

“That’s mean,” Miko protested.

“Who?” Jack played dumb.

“He’s not here at the moment,” Jack quipped. The federal agent fixed him a hard stare.

“Where. Is. He?”

The high school junior thought quickly. He learned the best lie was one that had a fraction of truth. “At home.”

“In Jasper, Nevada… two thousand miles away from here…”

The mention of the little town caught Lennox’s attention. “Jasper as in… the Jasper?”

Fowler sent a warning glare to the lieutenant colonel, but Miko spoke up before anyone could, “Yeah, backwater desert town, entertainment capital of the world, secret underground base of the Autobots…”

Jack closed his eyes and shook his head in defeat while Fowler facepalmed with a groan. Meanwhile, Lennox looked like the Japanese girl had slapped him in the face. Instead of staring at her, he directed his wild look at the federal agent.

“They know?!” he exclaimed.

“A little,” Fowler tried, only to again be interrupted by Miko.

“A little? We hang out at the silo everyday! We even have our very own partn—”

Her rambling was cut off with a yelp when Jack kicked her in the shin. Looking back at Lennox, the man looked like he had a stroke.

He was quiet for a full thirty seconds before he groaned, “General Bryce is going to kill you.”

“What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him,” Fowler insisted.

“Bill, the Autobots in daily contact with children? That’s a direct violation of the treaty!”

Jack had to bite his tongue to prevent correcting him as Miko chirped, “What treaty?”

The men ignored her.

“Which is why no one knows about it,” the agent argued. He fixed Lennox with his own glare. “What? You’re going to Bryce about it?”

“N-no, but—” the lieutenant colonel started.

“Good. Then drop it!”

“So what’s this treaty about?” Miko repeated. Jack, who didn’t dare say a word, wanted to snap at her to be silent before she got them arrested.

“And you,” Fowler snapped, turning back to his prisoners, “have some explaining to do. What are you doing here?”

“Field trip,” Jack answered quickly.

“Field trip,” Fowler repeated skeptically. “To the Pentagon…”

“Yeah, for, uh, our American government class. We’re touring the White House tomorrow.”
It wasn’t completely unfathomable. The Pentagon had opened up to public tours several years ago, school trips included. Jasper High, despite having a small population, did sponsor a few out-of-state events, including a trip to Washington D.C. For a science fair competition. But Fowler didn’t have to know that.

The man stared at them, unconvinced. It didn’t help the agent had been at Jack’s house two days prior, and had an hour long conversation with his mother. Who no doubt didn’t mention anything about school field trips.

“How’d you get back here?” Lennox questioned, calming down a little from his panic attack. He folded his arms, mirroring Fowler’s posture. Miko, catching on to Jack’s ploy, answered that one.

“We’re looking for the bathroom….we kinda got lost.”

Jack cringed at the lame lie.

“You two? …Together?” Lennox observed, eyes flicking back and forth between them.

“Yeah?”

The junior stepped in before his friend could dig them into a deeper hole.

“We got separated from the tour group,” he explained. “We were looking for them when the fire alarm suddenly went off.” He rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “I guess we accidently went through the ‘staff only’ door.”

He tried not to cave underneath the scrutinizing gazes of the government agents. He wondered if they actually bought it or not. He doubted it, considering he had a strong suspicion each had their fair share of interrogations. If he and Miko were just a random couple of teenagers, Fowler might have accepted they were just dumb kids that had gotten lost. But considering that was not the case…

“The ‘Bots put you up to this, didn’t they?” the agent sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“No, sir,” Jack answered, grateful it was again the truth.

No, the Autobots didn’t have anything to do with this. The ‘Cons, however… The drive felt hot and heavy in his pocket. All his interrogator had to do was ask for his belongings, and it would be all over.

“Fowler, Lennox, what’s going on here?” a smooth, authoritative voice snapped from down the corridor.

While Miko and Jack merely flinched as the bark, the government officials jumped to attention.

“Mr. Secretary, sir,” Lennox greeted as he turned around.

A tall, lean man with salt-and-pepper hair in a flashy suit walked up in a brisk pace. His eyebrows were furrowed in agitation, which turned to suspicion as he noticed the huddling teens. Secretary? Who would— Jack’s heart stopped as he realized the only secretary that would be in the building. The Secretary of Defense.

There was another stocky man beside the military head, who Jack automatically identified as a general. Complete with a plethora of ribbons and medals.

“Just a couple of kids that gotten lost,” the lieutenant colonel explained.
Both teenagers stared up at him with wide eyes, surprised. A second ago the man was interrogating them for trespassing. Was he... covering for them?

"Is that so?" the Secretary replied, skeptical. He turned his attention to the prisoners. "What are your names?"

Jack was tempted to give false names, but realized with Fowler staring at him, that it was futile. He swallowed and answered thickly, "Jack Darby, sir."

"Miko," his friend merely answered. She crossed her arms and tilted her chin, defiant. Meanwhile, Lennox cocked an eyebrow at Jack.

"...Darby?" he murmured. "As in, Captain... Johnathon Darby’s kid?"

Jack flinched, violently, and stared at the lieutenant colonel with his own look of disbelief. "...You knew my dad?"

"I served with him," Lennox replied. He turned to the Secretary, who had not looked away from the children, as if he expected they would run away if he did. "Sir, I can vouch for them. The boy comes from a military family." When the military head only gave a hard stare, the colonel added, "His father was in Operation Desert Fox."

Desert what? The military brat looked back and forth between the two men before him, utterly lost.

"Desert Fox?" the Secretary replied, looking back to Jack in a squint. Lennox nodded and the man furrowed his eyebrows before he decided, "I don’t have time to deal with this. Make sure they are escorted off campus immediately."

Jack almost collapsed to his knees in relief and Miko gave a small gasp of air. Lennox and Fowler, however, were still stiff as a board. The colonel hummed an affirmative and just like that, the Secretary and the general scurried down the hall and vanished from sight. Jack took his chance.

"So now that’s cleared up—" he stated, daring to take a step forward. Fowler’s glare put him back in place.

"I don’t know what’s going on here," the federal agent spat, gesturing between the two teens, "but one way or another, I’m going to find out."

Jack just hoped he could make it Mexico before the man could. With that last warning, Fowler volunteered to escort them out. Lennox offered to tag along, only for the federal agent to insist it was not necessary. The colonel had to return to NEST, anyway, since apparently their meeting was officially over. Without waiting for a word from the teenagers, Fowler stormed away, having them scurry after him. The special agent all but literally kicked Jack and Miko out of the building.

"Uh, we were with a tour group," the sixteen-year-old tried.

"Believe it or not," Fowler retorted, "I’m not that stupid. I don’t know what the ‘Bots are up to, but you are never coming into my personal workspace again."

"Sir, yes, sir!" Miko quipped, even daring to give a mock salute.

The pair of teens fled from the federal agent’s scathing glare.

Chapter End Notes
Why Fowler let Jack and Miko go, it’s because he under the impression they were sent by the ‘Bots (as I hinted in this chapter, have a habit of breaking human laws). As suspicious he may be, he doesn’t want the Autobots, or the kids, to get in trouble, especially when he’s trying to argue for the Autobots’ value as an ally.
Those kids had to be *blind*. He could have reached out and grabbed the girl, but she was completely obvious to his presence as she tore after her partner-in-crime. He glared at the boy. He recognized that face.

The pair of interlopers ran by, an entire force of police on their tails. Instead of joining the hunt, he calmly walked to the upper floor, trying find somewhere quiet. He happened to step out onto the first floor, just in time for the kids be caught by the Secretary of Defense himself.

Instead of intervening as the brats begged for mercy, he pulled out a phone. He dialed a number and waited. It was answered.

“I have sights on the Darby kid,” the agent reported. “You’re not going to believe this…”

Jack and Miko walked a good two miles from the Pentagon’s expansive parking lot, coming up to an empty construction site. Not a soul in sight, Jack sent a text to Raf, requesting a groundbridge. Then he opened up another conversation.

He stared at the phone for a long time. His chest felt tight and heavy. The weight on his hip felt even heavier. He swallowed and replied to the blocked number.

*I have it.*

The reply was instantaneous, like they were practically waiting on the line all day. It wasn’t a dry comment or fake praise or even instructions. Just a series of numbers and letters, that it took Jack a moment to realize were coordinates. Swallowing again, he closed the flip phone and stepped through the groundbridge.

Only to be greeted with a furious Arcee.

“What were you *thinking*?” the two-wheeler seethed, fixing them with burning, bright glare.

Jack’s heart stopped. Oh, no. The Autobots figured it out. They knew. They *knew*.

“Oh…” the boy stumbled, his tongue rooted in place.

“Going on a *live* battleground?” the Autobot scolded.

“Oh…”

Arcee didn’t seem to appreciate his cluelessness, because her optics brightened. “We were looking everywhere for you! What if something happened to you?”

Jack’s chest tightened and his fists balled. Miko spoke up before he could, her face impassive and her arms crossed in defiance.

“Oh, please!” she dismissed. “We were perfectly fine!”

“That was reckless,” the little Autobot replied.
Jack looked over Arcee’s head to see the rest of the Autobots looking down at them. Bulkhead sent a scolding glare to his partner, Bumblebee looked hurt, Ratchet seemed solemn, and Optimus’s expression was ever stoic, even without his battlemask. They all had dents and scraps from the recent battle, but instead their attention were fully on the mischievous children. Raf was perched on the platform leading to the main computer, his lip quivering and eyes conflicted. Jack couldn’t hold his tongue and the knot in his chest uncoiled.

“Oh, so now you care all of a sudden?” he spat at Arcee, forcing his way by without even looking at her. The device was hot in his pocket. Could the Autobots sense it? Weren’t they sensitive to their own technology? He hoped it had an impressive cloaking device.

“What is that supposed to mean?” the motorcycle demanded.

“You’ve been ignoring me for days and don’t even bother to shoot me a text, and now you’re just going to scold me like I’m some little kid.”

Arcee’s optics widened and her jaw slacked. “What are you—Wait, is that what’s this is all about?”

Jack opened his mouth to reply, but didn’t have the chance as a baritone voice interrupted.

“Arcee,” Optimus hummed, stepping forward. The quarrelling duo glanced up. The Autobot leader’s mask broke into a disapproving expression. It made Jack want to curl into a ball. “Your actions were irresponsible and reckless. You must consider the consequences.”

Jack shut his eyes tight. The pressure in his chest clamped down on his heart. For some reason, having the ancient sage scold him was worse than what had actually done. They had no idea.

He had to bite his tongue to keep from screaming in confession. How he was betraying them. The Autobots cared and respected him, and he was doing exactly what the Decepticons wanted him to do. Megatron was playing him like a damned fiddle, and he could do nothing. And it was all Jack’s fault.

He chose to let the warlord live. Because he was a damned coward. He nothing like the Prime. He was not brave, he was not powerful, he was not a leader. Not even a good soldier.

Even Optimus is disappointed in you, Megatron’s voice taunted.

“It won’t happen again,” Jack forced out in a low tone. “I… I need to go home.”

He made a show of looking at his phone. It wasn’t even in the evening. He could feel Optimus’s frown aimed towards him.

“Ugh, I guess that means I have to go, too,” Miko groaned, slouching in false disappointment. Jack widened his eyes at her, but she merely looked at Bulkhead expectantly. The Transformer promptly shifted into a Humvee.

“I... I should head back to my house,” Raf’s quivering voice came. “I have homework I got to do.”

Jack knew it was a lie. Raf always finished his homework before coming to the base; he couldn’t leave the house before he did. But Bumblebee must have believed him, because the ‘Bot transformed into a Camaro. Jack didn’t look at Arcee as he headed towards Bulkhead’s passenger side. He did not look at Optimus Prime.

His heart couldn’t bear to see that look again. He could feel the Autobot leader’s gaze boring into him as Bulkhead pulled away.
Jack stared at the computer screen before him, the transformed device plugged into the USB port. His mouth felt dry and his throat felt raw, his knuckles white as he held his hands into tight fists.

The screen was filled with files upon files—almost everything the device downloaded. About Sector Seven.

Part of Jack didn’t want to believe it. It couldn’t be possible. Part of him realized it finally made sense. Megatron had been captured by humans.

There was video after video of engineers and scientists pricking and prodding at the ice-covered, stasis-locked warlord, tearing apart his armor and inner wiring. Then converting it into the technology of the human race—weapons for the military, cars, communication devices, and countless more. Jack didn’t know what was more unnerving. The experiments themselves—teams of mechanics chopping Megatron apart like he was a car, or the fact the mighty Cybertronian was helpless.

Every feed showed the lord of the Decepticons utterly unmoving—lifeless. Those usually burning optics were dark and empty, unseeing. No sound came from the Cybertronian—no roar, no bellow, not even one of his menacing growls. If Jack didn’t know any better, he would have thought it was just soulless robot. But he did know better.

And to his horror, the teenager found everything clicking into place. Megatron had been sealed away for hundreds of years. No doubt the Decepticons were looking for their lost leader, eventually following his trail to Earth. They freed their imprisoned leader. Jack trembled as the video showed alarms going off and red lights flashing. The ice cocoon that held Megatron in place for century began to soften, falling off in chunks.

Lifeless optics turned into a hateful, raging crimson.

“I AM MEGATRON!”

Ice fell apart and supporting clamps broke away. Defenseless humans screamed and fled as Megatron ravaged his century-old prison, fire and debris and bodies flying everywhere. Jack watched as a single human in a suit stood unmoving in the middle of the chaos. The last functioning camera seemed to be at the perfect angle, showing the human and the Cybertronian stop like time had been frozen, locking gazes with one another. The warden and the prisoner.

*I will not be an experiment.*

Megatron’s great sword unsheathed, and he drove the tip into the director’s chest.

Now the rest of humanity was next.

Jack nearly screamed as there was a knock on his window. Almost falling out the bed, he shut his laptop closed and jumped to his feet. He peered through the dark window through a squint, only to sigh as he unlocked it.

“I have a front door, you know,” the boy deadpanned as he slid open the window.

“And get blocked by helicopter mom?” Miko replied as she ungracefully scrambled into his room. “No, thank you!”
Raf was smaller and slower, prompting Jack to give him a hand.

“What are you guys doing here?” he demanded.

“What’s it look like?” the Japanese girl questioned. “We’ll all in this together!”

Jack rolled his eyes. “No, we’re not. This is my problem. I’m not dragging you guys down with me.”

“Well, you should of thought of that before you asked us to help you commit a felony,” Miko pointed out, hands on her hip.

The boy opened his mouth to protest, only for a sputtering noise to come out. The fifteen-year-old cocked an eyebrow.

“That’s what I thought. We’re staying.”

If Jack knew anything about Miko, it was that once the stubborn girl made up her mind, there was no changing it. Hell, he fought too many battles trying, and he lost every one. Raf was planted in place as well, staring up at the older boy with a determined look.

“We can’t just sit by and let you face Megatron alone,” Raf insisted.

Jack didn’t point out that was alone against him in the mines. The teen was guilty enough bringing them into this in the first place—having them stay to face the consequences made him feel even worse. Especially since he now knew what likely awaited him once he gave Megatron what he wanted. The boy shivered at the images of the workers being slaughtered by the Decepticon without a second thought. He knew what the powerful tyrant was capable of. But seeing it, even through a screen, and seeing Megatron personally destroy humans, sent a new kind of terror through his veins. Jack would never forgive himself if his friends suffered the same fate.

“You… you don’t know what you’re getting into,” he tried. “M-Megatron, he doesn’t want beef on the Autobots. He’s after humans.”

Both children gave him a perplexed stare.

“What do you mean?” Miko asked, tilting her head.

Jack moved back to his perch on the bed, reopening the laptop. Raf and Miko settled on either side of him as he accessed the files he had been scouring through all afternoon. The teenager elected not to show them the footage he had just seen—he didn’t want to disturb his friends as much as he was. Instead, he opened up another browser.

One detailing Sector Seven. Apparently it was founded after seven crew members of the Witwicky Expedition. The mission was led by Captain Archibald Witwicky, in order to find the Northwest Passage, but they found something else.

“They snagged Megatron?” Miko gasped.

“Yeah,” Jack confirmed. “It took them thirty years to dig him out. They transported him to the Hoover Dam… which was built just to hide him.”

The sea explorers shared their discovery with the government, and each became involved with the project, even though their credit was never shared publicly. The organization began delving into strange phenomena around the globe, in both the present and the past, and found most of it to be result of alien relics. And aliens themselves.
There was countless pictures and even footage of Transformers, either exposed in their bipedal mode or in a vehicle that seemed too out of place. A flashy Jaguar sports car running three red lights in a row, only to escape a collision each time. A rogue Martin Raptor F-22 taking out its compatriots, and when the jets tried to counterattack, it sped away so fast it came a thin streak across the screen. A three-story tall, bulky Cybertronian, screeching and whirring as humans armed with rifles and nitrogen tanks fired at it. And...

The boy pulled up the file labeled “Project Iceman,” still careful to avoid anything relating to the experiments on the captive warlord. Instead, he pulled up a long list of names—anyone who participated, sponsored, or related to the project.

“It looks like they all died in freak accidents,” Raf gasped as Jack scrolled through their personal information. “Car crash, home invasion, factory equipment malfunction...”

The list went on and on, to the point it was hard to find someone that wasn’t dead. It was tragedy after tragedy after tragedy—but all of them unrelated. No two accidents were alike, all occurring at random locations all over the world, and they were either weeks or month or years apart. Jack swallowed. He realized what he was looking at. He snapped the laptop shut as nausea captured him in a vice grip.

“We need to go,” he announced quietly. “I don’t know how much longer Megatron’s going to wait.”

Miko squeezed his shoulder comfortingly, but it only made the boy stiffen. “We’re right behind you.”

Jack did not see that assuring.

The teenager wasn’t surprised when the coordinates he was given led to the abandoned factory. He opted to take his mother’s car, which just seemed to add to the guilt, but Jack realized it couldn’t get any worse. He dared to keep his head in the woman’s room to make sure she was truly asleep, only to be greeted with blackness and soft snoring. He was still deathly quiet when he took the keys and fled the house.

Jack had never been to the old factory at night before, and he realized why. During the day, the lifeless shell of the building and its smothering dimness made it feel unnerving. In the darkness, it was downright creepy. The silhouette of the giant building was black and foreboding. The still machines were menacing shadows in the night, looking like monsters standing over the teenagers. Every step on the littered floor gave an audible crunch that made Jack’s skin crawl. But there was something missing. Megatron.

There was no massive form leaning over them when the group stepping into the assembly room. The military brat was expecting the warlord to be impatiently waiting for him. His stomach knotted and it hurt when he swallowed.

“Wow, this place is spooky,” Miko murmured as she scanned the light from her phone across the room. It did little to suppress the suffocating darkness around them. “Where’s the party?”

“So, you brought your little friends.”

All three jumped at the deep, menacing voice above them, that seemed to echo off the walls with a terrifying reverb. Jack snapped his gaze up and saw the moonlight filtering through the broken roof reflect off a silver shape. At first he didn’t know what he was looking at, until his brain translated the
spiked armor and glaring optics into a familiar figure.

It was Megatron, but he was… small. When before the titan could barely fit in the large building, the warlord was perched up in the rafters above the teenagers. A shoulder casually leaned against a support beam and his arms were folded in boredom. With the deceiving size and relaxed posture, the Decepticon almost looked human. Almost.

“Whoa!” Miko gasped, more in surprise than anything. “Since when does Gigantor come in small size?”

Megatron curled his lips into a snarl. “You are small. I had to waste nearly all my energon reserves just to come close to your pathetic height.”

Jack’s head hurt and nausea crept up his throat. *Megatron, which moments ago was the size of a building, was now the height of a human adult. Just the right size to sit on his chest without crushing him.*

“New trick?” the boy asked.

“No.”

Guess an explanation was too much to ask. Gulpine, the teen stepped forward.

“I have what you want, Megatron,” he called, and holding up the transmitter in his hand. The tyrant eyed it greedily.

“Hmm, so you do,” the Decepticon leader rumbled. “I knew you would not disappoint.”

Jack’s skin prickled at the mocking tone in the praise. Without warning, Megatron stepped off of his perch, falling back to the earth in a silver streak. He landed nimbly on his feet, and straightened calmly. The boy whimpered. Apparently his brain lied about the shrunken Decepticon’s true height, because he stood seven feet tall. Cracks lay underneath the tyrant’s pedes.

“Bring it here, boy,” Megatron ordered, holding out a servo.

“Jack…” Raf whispered in warning.

“It’s okay,” Jack replied in a hushed tone. “Let me handle this.”

Raf bit his lip, sending the Decepticon a nervous look. Miko stared at the enemy with a mixed look of fascination and disdain. Jack wondered if she came along just so she could see the Decepticon tyrant up close. He knew Raf had come because the boy felt the need to uphold his young sense of chivalry.

Jack closed the distance in slow, cautious steps. His eyes flickered from Megatron, to his cannon, to the shadows around him. The sterling monster may technically have kept his word before, but he was still a Decepticon. The teen paused a safe distance from the dictator, holding out the device like it was a bomb.

“Here,” he spat, like a curse.

Megatron did not move to retrieve it, instead glancing at it curiously as he asked, “Have you seen its contents?”

“…Yes.”
Suddenly a pleased, wicked grin crossed the demon’s faceplates. “Then you know what I desire.”

It wasn’t hard to piece it together. A chill crawled down the boy’s spine, but he kept his voice monotone as he answered, “…You want to terminate the surviving members of Sector Seven.”

Apparently he couldn’t hide that trace of disgust and disapproval, because Megatron tilted his head. “If you had the chance to terminate the ones that murdered your father, would you take it?”

Jack’s hold on the device tightened painfully.

“What’s he talking about?” Miko asked curiously, overhearing.

Somehow that satisfied grin widened. “Ah, you did not tell them?”

The army brat told his friends his story months ago, and they were the only people in Jasper he told. Unlike most kids, they had not interjected with irrelevant questions or coo constantly with sympathy. They had merely listened intently, and did not press him.

“They know.”

“Oh, but do they know the extent of your pain?”

Did anyone?

I do.

“Come,” Megatron ordered, waving his fingers impatiently.

Jack did not know what possessed him to take a step forward. The warlord reached out and the boy expected him to take the drive. Instead cold claws wrapped around his wrist.

Whatever protest in his throat was cut off as Megatron jerked him forward, almost pulling his arm from its socket. The teenager yelped as he was slammed into a broad frame.

“Jack!”

The fusion cannon hummed to life.

“Miko, stop!” Jack screamed.

He looked to see the Japanese girl skid to a halt, Raf following her example. Both teenagers stood frozen underneath the gaze of Megatron’s weapon. The junior wheezed as an unrelenting, thick arm wrapped around his torso, pressing his back to the Decepticon’s front. He shivered with hot air blew on his neck.

“Did you really think I would make it so easy?” Megatron chided in a low whisper, his sharp denta scraping against Jack’s ear. He tried to jerk away, but his captor kept him place.

“It’s me you want,” Jack spat. He jerked his head to his friends. “Please, just let them go!”

The sharped-toothed demon chuckled darkly at his request. “And why would I do that?”

“They have nothing to do with this!”

“Oh, on the contrary, you were the one that brought them into this. My conditions were clear.”
“You said not to tell the Autobots! Well, I didn’t!”

Jack shivered with disgusted fear as Megatron scrapped his neck with fangs before rumbling in his ear, “And did your dear friends make the same promise?”

“What are you—”

Then he realized. He froze as a shiver went across his body. He stared at his friends, wide-eyed and jaw agape. Miko was staring at him between a mix of fear and concern, torn between helping her friend or avoiding the dictator’s wrath. Raf’s lip was trembling, cowering behind the Japanese girl.

“…Raf?” Jack breathed. “…You?”

The Hispanic boy looked up from the ground, tears welling up in his eyes.

“I-I had to!” he wailed, his voice cracking. “Bumblebee—”

“What did you do?!”

The younger teenager violently flinched at the elder’s harsh, broken scream. Miko looked between them, eyes widening in shock when realization dawned on her. Megatron was merely amused at the display.

“So disappointing when the ones we trust betray us,” he purred. He dropped his voice to a low, barely audible whisper. “So you choose, Jack.” The fusion cannon charged. “Who should I kill first?”

It was then a horrible clap of thunder came above them. Miko and Raf screamed and covered their heads as a shower of metal and concrete fell upon them, the roof being torn apart. Several more deafening explosions sounded as the walls of the factory were burst in, sending sharp debris everywhere. Jack wailed as a shard of glass caught the skin next to his eye. He flinched, flailing against Megatron, but the tyrant merely held him tighter. With a growl, the Decepticon leader fired his fusion cannon. Straight for Miko and Raf.

“No!” Jack screamed.

A protective servo wrapped around the teenagers, and everything turned into a blur. There was a series of clinking sounds as Megatron regained his full height. The human wheezed as claws pressed against him to form a metal cage. Through the gaps of his prison, the teenager saw flashes of warm, bright colors.

There was a series of grunts and growls and roars. Jack wailed repeatedly as his limited reality was jarred several times, his bones rattling and no doubt leaving him bruised. At long last, there was an explosive thunder with a jar of impact. The boy groaned in pain and slowly opened his tightly shut eyes.

Megatron had cleared space between him and his attackers. In the distance, the factory had been completely demolished in only a matter of seconds—some areas wasted to a pile of rubble and a single wall remaining in others. Suddenly the ruined building was cut off as several figures landed around the Decepticon leader.

The entire team of Autobots had come, even Ratchet. The medic stood behind the broad form of Optimus Prime, Miko and Raf in his arms. The Autobot leader faced Megatron directly, a single cannon trained on the dictactor’s helm, battle mask covering his faceplates. Around them, the Autobots glared with their own charged weapons.
“Return the child to us, Megatron!” Optimus bellowed. The Decepticon merely laughed.

“You took your time,” the titan mocked. “I could have destroyed the fleshings several times before you came. Unless…” He made a rumbling noise of thought. “Using your allies as bait. How unlike you, Optimus.”

The Prime’s optics narrowed dangerously, but did not fall for Megatron’s mind games. “I will not endanger the life of any sentient being.”

“And how do you intend to take him from me? Do you wish to fight?”

Jack wailed as suddenly his prison pressed against his ribs, painfully. Over his scream, he heard Arcee screech in fury and Bulkhead bellowed. Megatron ignored them, his undivided attention on his mortal enemy.

“Be aware any harm you bring upon me, is harm you bring upon the child,” the Decepticon leader pointed out. “In fact, I can just terminate him right now.” Jack whined as the talons’ tips pressed against his back. “Is that what you prefer, Optimus?”

“What’s stopping you from just killing him, anyway?” Acree demanded.

“And what’s stopping us from just blasting you to bits right now?” Bulkhead added.

Bumblebee whirred in agreement.


“You only would bring Jack more harm,” Optimus argued.

“Aa, yes. I quite enjoy his pain.”

Just to prove his point, the dictator’s talons pierced Jack’s flesh. The boy wailed. Several of the Autobots flinched, as if they did not to attack or not.

“Leave him alone, you monster!” Miko screeched, but her voice sounded small and faint from her distance.

“What will you do once you have him?” Megatron continued. “You know what he’s done. I have all I need to destroy my enemy, which you were too weak to finish!”

“I will not punish humanity for the actions of a few,” Optimus retorted. “And I will not punish Jack for what he was coerced to do.”

“Ah, he did not tell you?”

“Megatron…” Jack whined pathetically. “Please…”

The tyrant ignored him, grinning evilly. “Your dear pet had the opportunity to finish me, you know. Instead, he chose to aid me. Jack freed me from the mines, willingly, just like he told me everything he knew about the Autobots.”

“You’re lying!” Arcee snarled. “Jack would never do your bidding!”

“No? Go on, tell them, Jack…”

The talons were removed, exposing the human to five scrutinizing stares. Jack was curled in a
pathetic ball, trembling. He fought the tears that threatened to come. He tried to swallow, but it hurt too much.

“I-It’s t-true,” he stammered, his voice weak and small.

He wondered if the Autobots even heard his confession. He dared to look up, only to meet Arcee’s widened gaze, her blasters lowered in her shock. Jack wanted to tear his heart out, if it meant the pain in his chest would go away. Megatron chuckled darkly.

“So idealistic and naïve,” he murmured, stroking a claw down the traumatized boy’s back. “He reminds me a great deal of Orion Pax.”

Jack watched as a strange shudder rippled across Optimus’s frame, like the warlord had reached over and plucked his neural net. The Autobot leader’s optics narrowed into slits.

“Jack will not be the object of your twisted delusions,” the Prime growled.

“Of course not,” Megatron practically laughed. “Now, my old friend, will you fight over a traitor merely to cause his demise? Or—” Claws closed around Jack possessively, suffocating him. “Leave him to where he wants to be?”

The Autobots flinched again. For the first time since Jack met them, they seemed unsure what to do. The warriors exchanged glanced with one another, shifting their uncertain gazes between the two quarreling leaders. The human shivered in horror as the sage held that same conflicted look.

He didn’t want this. He didn’t want to be here. He didn’t want to be with Megatron. Or the Autobots. Jack never wanted to be a part of this stupid war. And now, he was the center of it.

The human’s blood turned to ice as he heard the disengaging of a cannon.

“Autobots, stand down,” Optimus Prime ordered, his voice heavy.

“Optimus!” Ratchet gasped.

“What?” Bulkhead roared.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” Miko shrieked.

Bumblebee let out a series of high-pitched protests.

“Optimus, don’t do it!” Raf begged.

“No!” Arcee screeched. Her optics lined red with hateful fury. “I won’t let you take him!” The guardian ignored Optimus’s bark as she charged forward. Blades engaged, she reached out, as if to pluck her partner from his prison. “Jack!”

Her desperate, broken scream was the last Jack heard before everything disappeared in darkness.
Rise of a Tyrant

Jack awoke to darkness. Moaning, he blinked his eyes several times for them to adjust, only for the blackness to remain. Soreness radiated across his body, and the boy shifted to get rid of the stiffness. Only for his limbs to remain immobile. What?

It was then Jack became aware of a high-pitched ring in his ear, and suffocating heat around him. He shifted again, only for his hand to collide with something smooth and solid. Metal. His mind swam with disorientation. Where… where was he?

Where were the Autobots? They were— Jack gasped as he remembered. The Autobots… the Autobots didn’t fight for him. Which meant—

Horror welled up in the teenager’s chest as he realized where he was. He moved his arms to his chest, pressing his fists against the metal cocoon around him. There was no reaction, his prison pressing against him. Jack’s breath hitched when claustrophobia seized him in a vice grip. He began pounding against the walls around him, hard.

“Let me go! Let me go!” he screamed at the top of his lungs. “Let me out! Megatron!”

The metal groaned, complaining. Suddenly there was the distinct sound of gears and plating shifting and the walls moved. Frigid air greeted Jack like a slap to the face. His stomach flew up to his throat as Megatron landed with a clap of impact, catching the boy in his claws before he faceplanted.

Immediately Jack recognized the flight deck of the Nemesis, covered in scratches from repeated abuse of flyers launching and landing. The wind whipped at his clothes, roaring in his ears, as black clouds raced by. The full moon was filling the night sky, providing the only light. The ship had to be in the upper troposphere, judging by the cold air alone.

Jack was already shivering, madly. His teeth were chattering. He tried to fill his lungs, which were screaming for air, only for his throat to burn. His breaths came shallow and short. His heart was racing, slamming against his ribcage and pounding against his ears. A part of Jack recognized he was hyperventilating.

*Calm down, Jack. Calm down.*

He tried to practice the breathing exercises his mother taught him, but a burst of shivers interrupted each time. He felt the blood rushing to his head and the ship tilted.

Jack must have passed out, because he opened his eyes to alien fluorescent lights. There was a rumble above him, and the boy felt his body being tilted. Suddenly the silver cage retracted and he was deposited on a soft, warm material. It sunk underneath his weight only to restore itself once he shifted, like some sort of memory foam.

Jack lifted himself to all fours and tried to scan his dim surroundings. He was on some kind of surface, the alien material making up a gigantic slab, which had to be twice of Megatron’s width. … A berth? The boy tried to find look at the room beyond, but it was hard to distinguish anything through the gloominess. It was mostly barren anyway, from what he could tell.

Jack trembled. He was really on the Nemesis. The Autobots… they tried to save him, but they couldn’t. The teen shut his eyes, the image of a furious Arcee flashing across his vision. She had cut off all ties with him for over a week, and she had tried to save him. Because she was his guardian. But it wasn’t enough. It was never enough.
The boy gritted his teeth, fighting back a whine, and fell back to his side. Above him, he heard the sound of transformation, but he ignored it as he curled into a pathetic ball. Shaking, he hid his face in his arms in an illusion of privacy. The human didn’t even hear the sound of muffled pedes nearing him.

Jack flinched, violently, as servos wrapped around his wrists and pulled his arms away. He was turned to lay on his back, looking up at crimson optics. Bile rose up to the boy’s throat. He never wanted to see that gaze again. He shut his eyes tight and jerked his head way, only for a servo to cup his cheek and turned his face back. A claw stroked away a tear he did not realize had fallen.

“You are quiet,” Megatron observed in a low tone.

“There’s nothing to say,” Jack replied in the same manner.

“You’re upset.”

“That obvious?”

With that, the teenager tried to turn away, but Megatron held him still. The warlord shifted to lay beside him, and Jack instinctively tried to slide away from the heat of the Decepticon’s frame. He was denied when one arm slipped underneath his head. The boy automatically tried to flinch away, but the other servo gripped his wrist, keeping him from ever escaping.

“Now you know,” Megatron rumbled, “what it’s like to be betrayed by Optimus Prime.”

“…He was trying to save me,” Jack argued weakly.

“Was he?”

“You threatened to kill me.”

The Decepticon flashed his fangs. “I had every intention of destroying you. But apparently Prime believes leaving you in my care is more merciful.”

Jack didn’t heartily agree. Especially he couldn’t see how Megatron could be merciful if he openly wanted to destroy the human race.

“Why don’t you just kill me,” the teenager murmured, closing his eyes, waiting for it to come.

“No,” Megatron refused. “You’re much more useful to me alive. And after all, I do not reward my enemies with what they desire.”

Jack trembled at the former statement. “How?” When the sterling tyrant cocked an optic ridge, he added, “I’m… human.”

Megatron chuckled when he realized the boy’s meaning. “Yes, you were wasted being born as such a weak creature. But the Autobots undermine you.” When Jack squinted at him, the warlord elaborated, “They are quick to scold you, aren’t they? Hide you from our sights?”

“To protect us—”

Lips curled back in a snarl. “And where were the Autobots, Jack, as you suffered in solitude? You did not need them to take care of your family and bear the pain of losing it.” Jack felt that cruel statement crawl under his skin, and he knew the warlord wanted it to. “You held your own against my kind, you survived alone in the mines, and you made a mockery of your own military. Yet they
see you as helpless."

It was hard to feel anything but, considering his current predicament. Jack tried to ignored silver-tongued demon. Megatron was a Decepticon—he had millions of years to learn how to twist even the strongest of minds to do his bidding.

“They’re my friends,” the boy tried instead.

“Even though they betrayed you? Would you say the same about the little one?”

Jack couldn’t help that single tremor. He didn’t want to be angry at Raf. The younger boy always wanted the best for everyone. He believed in sticking up for the small guy and finding a solution to a problem without conflict. Raf thought he was saving Jack, by warning the Autobots of Megatron’s manipulation. The army brat didn’t want to think his friend had betrayed him, but Raf promised.

“…Yes,” Jack forced out, but it wasn’t as strong as he wanted. Megatron let out a quiet laugh.

“You are so naïve, dear child,” the dictator chided. He finally released Jack’s arm, moving to stroke his claws across the human’s soft cheek. The boy shivered but didn’t have the energy to slap it away. “Your heart may be right place, just like him, but I have seen the darkness inside your soul.” Red optics flared. “Your anger, your ambition, your hate. You are more Decepticon than the Autobots care to admit, and that is why Optimus belittles you.”

“I’m nothing like you.”

“We share more in common than you do with Prime.”

Jack didn’t know how to argue against that. He was certainly nothing like the legendary leader, but he definitely didn’t want anything to do with Megatron, either. Then again, he had betrayed everyone he knew and loved. He doomed his entire planet by setting Megatron free. He had handed the monster the death warrants of human beings. And…

“…Are you going to attack the Autobot base?” the teenager dared to ask.

“What do you think?”

Jack had an idea, but he didn’t want to say it out loud. He definitely didn’t want to hear Megatron confirm it.

“I did what you asked,” the boy argued instead.

“You allowed the Autobots to be alerted to my presence,” Megatron retorted. Jack’s stomach twisted and a claw stroked his face, almost as if in comfort. “Do not fret, I will not force you to watch.”

The human did not see that assuring. The Autobots would be destroyed, and it would be all his fault. He couldn’t bear the idea of witnessing it. But what if the Autobots prevailed? What if they escaped? How would Jack know? Was it better knowing, or not knowing?

“..And Sector Seven?” he continued. He winced when Megatron let out a deep, angry growl, reminded of his tormentors.

“They will receive the punishment that they deserve.”

It was in a low, dangerous purr, and Jack realized it was a promise. That ensured pain and destruction. The boy couldn’t help but fear and pity for those poor souls that would suffer the wrath
of Megatron. At the same time, and to his horror, the human couldn’t blame the warlord’s bitterness. He was imprisoned, experimented on… he was tortured.

“If you had the chance to terminate the ones that murdered your father, would you take it?”

But not once did the Autobots mention the government organization. Not Optimus, not Arcee…

“Why did no one tell me?” Jack thought, not realizing he had murmured it aloud. He flinched when Megatron replied in his gravelly tone.

“When the humans agreed to cooperate with the Autobots, Optimus saw all grievances forgiven, and so forgotten,” the Decepticon explained. “Even though they captured his own scout.”

Sector Seven took Bumblebee? It was amazing, then, that they didn’t suffer the full wrath of not Megatron, but a furious Prime. Then again, Optimus was a Guardian Knight of Primus. He protected the weak. He was not vengeful. Unlike Megatron…

The teenager closed his eyes, trying to block out his surroundings and Megatron’s dominating presence. He quickly realized it was impossible, especially when claws trailed down his neck, the tips dangerously close to his carotid artery.

“You said I reminded you of Orion Pax,” Jack recalled, opening his eyes and daring to meet that crimson gaze. “Who’s that?”

In the entire year the army brat had spent with the Cybertronians, he had never seen one dumbstruck. He certainly never expected to be Megatron, of all beings, to be rendered so utterly speechless. The silver warlord blinked in surprise, optic ridges raised high and optics so bright that the human couldn’t look directly at them. It took several long moments for the Decepticon leader to break out of the spell. Jack jumped when suddenly the dictator burst out in a deep, bellowing laugh.

“Optimus really doesn’t tell you anything, does he?” Megatron commented, still chuckling from his hysterical outburst.

“Um…”

It was Jack’s turn to be speechless. Megatron acted like he had said a bad joke, and not a legitimate question. The tyrant smiled, flashing denta.

“I suppose a history lesson is in order, hmm?”

Before the boy could even think of a reply, the Decepticon returned to his titanic size. He scooped up his prisoner in a single servo and climbed off the berth, lumbering out of the room. Jack balanced on all fours on Megatron’s palm, even clinging to a talon for support. He was still braced to jump if need be. Even if the floor was three stories below him.

Drones ignored the human’s existence as they bowed in the presence of their lord, not daring to stand taller or even meet his gaze. Only one did not grovel at the sight of Megatron. Jack hid behind the claws that surrounded him as Soundwave neared his master, as silent and impassive as ever. That faceless visor tilted up, and even though the surveillance chief had no optics, Jack could feel something watching him.

Megatron said something in Cybertronian to his third-in-command. As always, Soundwave made no reply, merely nodded obediently when the warlord finished giving his orders. Like nothing ever happened, the two Decepticons went their separate ways in opposite directions. Jack did not dare ask what the topic of the one-sided conversation was about.
Instead, broad doors opened, and the human’s heart jumped in his throat. He recognized the dark room as the laboratory. Not here. Anywhere but here. Jack shut his eyes tight, trying to force out the memories.

“This will go smoother if you do not resist.”

Before the captive could say anything, the Decepticon jammed the end of the line into the human’s spine.

“Running isn’t going to help you now.”

Something stroked Jack’s back.

“No harm will come to you, my dear,” Megatron assured in that soft, low purr. Jack didn’t believe him.

A flash of red stepped into the teenager’s vision. Knock Out gave a wicked grin when he noticed the human.

“So nice of you to visit,” the medic taunted.

Jack was tempted to tell the Decepticon where to shove it. But realizing he was in no position to give insults or threats, he remained silent, merely glaring at the Aston Martin.

“Attend to the fleshling,” Megatron ordered in English, holding out his prisoner.

Jack immediately recoiled from Knock Out’s outstretched claws. Not again, not again!

“No point in fussing, now,” the medic chided and plucked the human up.

The teenager wheezed as he was basically dropped onto the slab, just like before. He was trembling again. The last time Knock Out monitored him, he had nearly died, between the medic’s ignorance and the stress on his body. He was frozen when Decepticon twisted his body around. He sucked air through his teeth as sharp claws poked at his tender back. The raw tissue Megatron had ripped open stung in the cold air. Knock Out hummed in thought.

“Can you fix it?” the Decepticon leader demanded.

“Well, if I have the proper materials…”


The extra-terrestrials merely looked confused, and Jack realized the Cybertronians had no equivalent to the words. His brained racked with the medical jargon Ratchet would use when treating the Autobots after a fierce battle.

“Blockers, sedatives, nanites,” he recalled the Autobot medic described them to aid in repair. A poor analogy, but it would have to do. He added quickly, “But for humans.”

Megatron looked up in thought, rumbling. He shifted his gaze back to Knock Out, switching back to his native tongue. The medic’s optics went wide and he sputtered. He replied in protest. The warlord growled, and it ended the conversation.

Jack’s skin prickled. He had no idea if Megatron agreed to his request or not. He could have ordered Knock Out to resolute it, or he had ordered the medic to do completely different task. He was also confused. The sterling titan had promised a “history lesson,” whatever that meant. He didn’t see how
trying to explain human anatomy to a Cybertronian medic covered that.

Staring at the floor in an attempt to ignore his captors, he did not see Knock Out near him. Wire ejected. Jack screamed as something sharp pierced his neck and electricity coursed through his body.

NO! Not again! Not again!

His senses were whited out, and he fought to keep his thoughts from drifting away. He already told them everything! Why? Why were they forcing him into the patch?

He felt that dark, foreboding presence pressing against him.

You have been through this before. Do not fear, little one. I will be your guide.

Jack screamed as corridors of Megatron’s sick mind enveloped him. The dark walls that surrounded him disappeared. Replaced by the walls of Kaon.

---

He was of no state. No home. No name.

Instead there were only the bowels of Kaon. Dark and desolate. He would not see the sun of the surface for vorns. Some areas were filled with acidic air. Some were filled with toxic rivers. It was inhabitable, yet it was miners that lived here.

The bowels were rich in energon and other rare materials. It was his duty, along with hundreds of other miners, to retrieve it for those that dwelled above. Sometimes they found plentiful. Sometimes they found scraps. It did not matter, not until a miner filled his quota.

A shift would not end until the required energon was delivered. It could take joors, or orns. In that time, miners were to work, and only work. No rest, no refuel. Many fell from mere exhaustion, if the rocks or the poison did not take them first. But he did not fall.

He did not rest, until he finished what he was told to do. Sometimes finding energon was an impossible task, especially if the tunnels shifted from unfortunate collapses. His unique ability to shift was useful.

It took time to master it. At first, he could do it only when he transformed, like most. But he shifted himself smaller and smaller each time. He began to teach himself to accomplish it without transforming. Shifting was not unlike it. Sometimes he made himself bigger than his true size, but it was the small sizes that allowed him to navigate the tight tunnels and to slip through cracks.

It infuriated the other miners. More than once he was attacked, merely because he completed his quota early. Most of the time his prize would be stolen, and his struggles began anew. It was for this reason he was careful with his unique ability. Once he made himself too small, and one of the larger miners tried to squash him. He reveled the miner's expression when he resumed his true height. It was his first kill.

Shifts were few and far between, and in that time, there was nothing to do. Except to fight.

The Pits of Kaon offered rewards. Shelter, energon, the sun. Many of the gladiators did no t have names, like him. Many were miners, forgers, untouchables. No gladiator was privileged. Those of the higher classes belonged to another part of the Pits—the spectators.

He learned quickly that there was no mercy in the Pits. The crowds disliked mercy. They did not favor a fighter—they merely enjoyed it whenever a hit was delivered. He began to tolerate the
jeering of the crowd. He began to revel it. Every slash, every blast, every death, sent a shudder through his frame. Each victory sent a hot, electric surge through his systems.

He did not fall. It infuriated the gladiators. He realized he would not be their prey. They would be the ones to fall. They would fear him.

He found a name. A name that invoked terror.

He was Megatronus.

To speak the Fallen's name was forbidden. Blasphemy. An uncertain hush fell over the crowd whenever it was heard. His opponents froze, shivered, keened.

He won. Again and again and again and again. His opponents whined. The crowd cheered. They came to favor a gladiator, one whose name they chanted with fervor.

"MEGATRONUS! MEGATRONUS! MEGATRONUS!"

A Champion of the Pits of Kaon.

Megatronus felt it coursing through him.

Power.

Jack did not understand.

It took time to escape the walls of the Pits. To escape the prison that was Kaon.

It was not done without aid. There were those that preferred him in the halls of Iacon than the bowels of Kaon. And for that, Megatronus was grateful.

In Iacon, he wanted for nothing. There was no darkness, no poison, no death. There was life everywhere. Energon poured from fountains. He did not understand.

Why was Kaon left to suffer, but Iacon lived in luxury? What made the miners and gladiators so different than the scholars and councilors? Megatronus saw no difference in the corruption.

He was not alone to ask these questions.

A contact of a dear ally. A mech that assisted in his arrival. A clerk, from Iacon's great Hall of Records.

Orion Pax.

There was a great deal in common between them: idealism, ambition, righteousness, rebelliousness. Orion was no fighter, which disappointed Megatronus. However, he was skilled in mind, and the freed gladiator respected that. Orion taught him the ways of knowledge. Megatronus taught him the ways of battle. In their spare time, they conspired.

A change needed to come to Cybertron. One that promised no mech was lower than another, nor punished for the actions of their free will. Kaon and Iacon needed to stand side-by-side, not one stepping on the other.

Megatronus's allies agreed. Orion Pax's allies agreed. So did many. Both in Iacon and Kaon. Along with other, distant states. Vos, Tarn, and many more. Even those of the colonies agreed.
In time, not even the High Council could ignore their argument.

The surge filled Megatronus's entire being as he stepped into the High Chambers. To stand where Primes had stood! Undefeatable warriors, legendary guardians, grand rulers. To be a Prime was to wield power itself.

Power to change Cybertron to what it should be.

Power, that the High Council was too selfish to give.

They saw Megatronus as a gladiator, a miner, an insect. But they saw Orion Pax, the skilled student of Sentinel Prime and the humble servant of Alpha Trion. And listened to him instead. Power would remain to Iacon, and only to Iacon.

Orion Pax did not refuse. Megatronus did.

"See reason," the Iaconian begged.

"I have," the Kaonian replied. "You are no Prime. You are a tool. I will not grovel."

Especially not for what he rightfully deserved. He suffered to become the best. Orion was merely privileged with it.

Megatronus was betrayed. By the one he trusted most.

Calm blue optics turned a malicious red.

It was too much!

Warfare consumed the planet. There was a choice: fight for the High Council, or fight for Megatronus.

Entire states were torn apart. Classes crumbled. Towers fell. Brother fought brother.

The High Council, the cowards they were, went into hiding when the fighting broke out. They used their Autobots as their mindless minions. They did not hesitate to demonize the Champion that called himself after the Fallen, the first deceiver.

Decepticons, they were called. Traitors. Heretics.

The accusation made Megatronus laugh. His army was created from deception of the High Council. But if they were accused of the same crime of the Fallen, then so be it. They would wear it as a badge of honor. If speaking the truth was deception, then they were gladly guilty.

Megatronus rather be honest in his intentions, than be a liar like Zeta Prime. He was a False Prime.

He was no guardian, and he certainly was no leader. He did not care for his people. He did not care for his home. He cared only for power, and the utter destruction of his enemy.

Zeta Prime would carelessly send his forces to eradicate a Decepticon stronghold. It was a pity, how many lives were wasted. When Megatronus counterattacked in a quiet, less costly attack, the Prime accused him of being cowardly. At least the Decepticons had more troops.

Zeta took no captives in his ruthless assaults. He would take the heads, the sparks, and sometimes entire husks, and post them on display in Decepticon and Autobot strongholds alike. If he did take prisoners, many of them suffered tortures worst than termination. The Autobot leader did not even
trust his own forces, sending spies among them to root out possible Decepticons. Many were falsely accused.

They were grateful when Megatronus rescued them. They did not hesitate to join his ranks. They gave him information. Such as where to find the False Prime.

Zeta Prime was as arrogant and sadistic as Megatronus expected. He was as certainly as powerful as a Prime, but he did not hone his skills in the Pits of Kaon. Never again the Decepticon leader would feel the same rush of power as when he terminated the tyrannous Prime.

He was no longer a Champion of Kaon.

He was Megatron, Lord of the Decepticons!

The Autobots scattered. More joined his ranks. Victory was promised to him. At long last, he would carry the Matrix of Leadership. He would be greater than a Prime.

Then the Autobots rallied. They fought against him, calling for peace and freedom and other ridiculous things. They had found a new leader.

Orion Pax.

The clerk-turned-military leader found the Matrix of Leadership. He stole it.

Megatron found his one true enemy, one that betrayed him and now stood between him and what he rightfully deserved.

Optimus Prime.

Do you see now?

It was Optimus that ordered the Great Exodus. Thousands and thousands of Autobot vessels fled Cybertron. It infuriated Megatron.

No! Cybertron was their home! They would stay and fight! He would take what was his!

He destroyed many of the retreating forces, but it was not enough. Many of them disappeared into distant systems. With no one left to fight, the Decepticons began to disperse. Some pursued their enemy. Some deserted. Some remained under Megatron’s command. But there was no command to give.

Cybertron was a barren wasteland. What he fought so hard to free, to change, to take, was gone. Destroyed by the Autobots and their prideful stubbornness. No! This would not be the end! Cybertron would be his!

Optimus Prime was to blame for the dead world.

The coward stole the AllSpark, the core of Primus himself, and sent it into space. The life source of all Cybertronians. Optimus had condemned their entire race to extinction, just to keep power to himself.

Megatron would not allow it. He left the remnants of his forces on the dying planet, and he assembled a task force. A scouting team. A crew.

They embarked on the Harbinger. They would scour the galaxy, searching for the AllSpark wherever
it may lie. They would revive Cybertron, and save their home.

It was Megatron’s decision to refuel on an old Decepticon outpost, used mostly to store energon from Autobot forces. He did not expect to be betrayed yet again. The Harbinger malfunctioned, and it crashed in the northern axis of the planet.

Cold. It covered his plating, it embedded in his inner circuitry, it invaded his systems. To save himself from being deactivated, Megatron’s body was forced into stasis lock. The ice that trapped him because his prison. For a long time, it was cold and silent.

He did not know how much time had passed when finally, finally, a sound broke through the silence. His systems detected movement in the ice above, the prison groaning and cracking in protest. There were tiny voices, chattering in a strange, crude language. Then a heat source appeared beside Megatron.

Protocols came to life. His navigation system was activated. Crimson optics onlined.

Captain Archibald Witwicky screamed.

It was then his prison was removed, chipped away little by little until his frozen body was once again exposed to the outside world. But it was still too cold. His body did not free from stasis lock. Megatron could not resist as they dragged him onto one of their primitive water-bound vessels.

Once it grew just warm enough. Once an insect came too close. The fleshlings shrieked in fright at his crimson optics and his stained claws. The cold returned, and it did not retreat this time.

He felt it. Every time they impeded their strange machines. Every time they shocked him, as if just to get a reaction. Every time they tore away a piece of mesh. The fleshlings would not stop chattering. They would not stop meddling with their inferior devices. Their system didn’t even have firewalls. It was easy enough for Megatron to invade them, and download all of their knowledge.

They called this planet Earth. They called themselves humans. The Decepticon forces that he once left on this planet were gone, disappeared from the native species’ history. They called him many things.

A robot, a machine.

For the first time in vorns, Megatron felt warmth.

They called him a tool.

His ice prison began to crack and steam, melting.

They called him an it.

Shouts rung out. Alarms blared.

They called him NBE-1.

He was none of those things. He was not an experiment. He was a Kaonian, a gladiator, a champion. He was Lord of the Decepticons.

Crimson optics flared.

“I AM MEGATRON!”
The connection was broken. Jack snapped his eyes open. His body was shaking. His head pounded as agony coursed through his body in ways. His heart thundered against his ribcage, blood roaring in his ears. Nausea captured him in a vice grip and he heaved. He heard Knock Out’s voice, shrill and panicked, but it was muted, like the boy’s surroundings were made of water.

The human blinked rapidly, trying to get rid of the images that kept flashing across his eyes. Cities, destruction, death, ice, prison. He couldn’t process it all. It was too much! Jack gripped his head and whined.

“He will be fine,” Megatron rumbled.

Suddenly something cold and hard wrapped around Jack. He flinched, trying to get away, but it held firm. No! He would not be imprisoned again!

“Calm down, Jack,” Megatron whispered in his ear. “All will be well.” Jack keened and the strong arms held him tighter. “Knock Out, did you retrieve what I require?”

“Y-yes, my liege,” the medic replied, still uncertain.

Jack couldn’t breathe. He panted heavily, trying to fill his lungs, but no air came. Suddenly something cold pressed against his lips. He tried to flinch away, only for something to press against the back of his head, tangling in his black hair.

“Drink, my pet,” Megatron ordered, in a sickly soft tone.

Liquid forced its way into his mouth. Jack gagged at the toxic flavor. He tried to spit it out, only for his body to instinctively swallow. He groaned when his body shuddered.

“Shhh…” his captor hushed.


Now Jack understood. What it was like to be betrayed.
William Lennox decided “groundbridging,” as the Autobots called it, was the strangest thing he ever experienced. Fowler invited him to the Autobot base, of course with Optimus Prime’s permission. The Autobot leader respected the human commander, and approved of the meeting to rekindle the amity between them. They were the military leaders of NEST, after all. However, Lennox felt guilty that he would not come under the best of circumstances. He needed to review the treaty’s articles with the Prime.

He planned to fly with Fowler to the military-silo-turned-outpost, only for the federal agent to call him, out-of-breath and frantic.

“Change of plans, Lennox,” the liaison gasped. “Something happened.”

Lennox regretted asking.

“The Autobot base has been compromised.”

The lieutenant colonel did not hesitate to contact the closest NEST forces to the abandoned outpost. He kept a team close by, just in case for something like this. He knew the wiser decision was to stay in the rear to give commands, but all Lennox did was pace around his desk anxiously. He needed to be there. Not only to know how in the hell the enemy gained such a vital piece of information, but to see what he needed to do. It looked like the back-up plan was a good idea, after all.

Lennox requested for a groundbridge. He screamed and fell out of his chair when a explosion of light came from right next to him. His eyes widened at the swirling vortex. He was just supposed to… step through that? Gulping, the NEST commander did just that.

One moment, he was in his office at NEST headquarters. The next, he was stepping into Autobot Outpost Omega One. Lennox swayed as the groundbridge snapped close. There was a short laugh and a clap on his shoulder.

“First time’s always a bitch,” Fowler commented.

Lennox moaned in reply. He let the federal agent guide him to the large expanse that had become the base of operations. There were huge computer screens making up the center, catwalks crisscrossing the silo. The Autobot’s emblem made up the floor, bold and proud.

However, Lennox didn’t receive a greeting from the proud aliens themselves. He wasn’t expecting a warm greeting, but he felt like he walked in on a funeral. The giants were all hunched, heads low, looking smaller than they usually did. Their eyes—optics—were dim. Only Optimus Prime didn’t seem depressed, stepping forward only to kneel, trying to make himself small as possible.

“Commander Lennox, I will like to welcome you,” the Autobot leader greeted. “Though I regret it is not under the best of circumstances.”

“What happened?” Lennox demanded. It was Fowler that answered him.

“The ‘Cons snatched Jack,” the federal agent explained solemnly. The lieutenant colonel snapped towards him like the other man had slapped him. He was only greeted with a hard stare. “Kid broke under interrogation.”

Wait? Interrogation? The only way Jack would have been interrogated was if he was… captured.
Lennox glared at Fowler, realizing the liaison had decided to keep several details to himself. He may have been protecting the kids, but he failed to complete his duty. Now he could only hope reinforcements arrive in time to cover the evacuation.

“Wait, how?” the lieutenant colonel demanded.

“Megatron…” a voice hissed.

Lennox looked over to see the smallest of the Autobots, slouching in the dark corner of the silo. She was the newest arrival, he recalled, Arcee. Her wings drooped and her optics were dim as she hung her head like a dog. Before Lennox could say anything, a small, high-pitched voice came from above them.

“It’s all my fault! I shouldn’t have said anything!”

The yellow Camaro, Bumblebee, softly whirred in a protest, hunched over a pair of figures.

“You are not to blame for this incident,” Prime insisted. “You did right to warn us of the impeding danger.”

“But he took Jack! A-a-and n-now… now…”

The voice broke into a series of pitiful sounds. Stepping away from Prime and Fowler, Lennox trotted up the stairs to one of the upper levels. In a base meant for giant beings, he was surprised to see a human-made sanctuary. An old, linen sofa was pushed up against the corner. Across from it was a spotless, brand-new tv, with a gaming console hooked up to it. However, the controllers were left unattended, as a pair of teenagers were hunched up on the couch.

One was a boy, curled in a trembling ball, knees to his chest and arms wrapped them. His face was buried in the tangle of limbs, hidden from view. His spiky, reddish hair was a mess and a pair of glasses was thrown to the side. Next to him was an older girl, with olive skin and rebellious pink highlights through her pitch-black hair. Her hazel eyes were shiny as she rubbed circles on her friend’s back. Bumblebee was hunched over them, crooning softly. Lennox slowly and cautiously approached the boy.

“Hey, now,” he murmured, kneeling in front of the traumatized teenager. He carefully pried the shielding arms away, forcing the boy to look up, revealing a red, tear-stained face. Lennox gently squeezed a shoulder. “We’re going to get Jack back, okay?”

A lip quivered and the boy whined, “Megatron said he’ll hurt him…”

Lennox swallowed. He had seen the warlord’s wrath firsthand, and it was something he never wanted to see again. He could still hear that taunting, menacing growl in his nightmares…

“We’ll save him, I promise,” the colonel could only say.

“What are you doing here, then?” the girl demanded, her grief turning into impatient anger. “Go get him!”

“We will. But if the base has been compromised, we have to secure the Autobots first.”

“What are you talking about? The ‘Bot are here.” She gestured to the giant beings, that had circled around the humans.

“That’s not what he means, Miko,” Fowler said, stepping up to the girl. She glared at him.
“Then what does he mean?”

There was a clanking of pedes as one of the Autobots stepped forward. Lennox recognized Ratchet, their medic.

“Should anything occur,” the old Cybertronian stated, “NEST has a facility that can cloak our signatures from enemy scanners.”

“Yeah, so?” the girl replied. “What does that have to do with—” The teenager froze as the dots finally connected. Her eyes went wide and she fixed the pair of government officials with a burning gaze. “N-no! You can’t! You can’t take the ‘Bots away!”

“We don’t have a choice—” Lennox started, but was cut off by Miko’s screech.

“No!” She jumped to her feet, turning to the largest Autobot. “Tell them, Bulkhead! Tell them you want to stay!”

The Wrecker looked conflicted, optics rotating in anxiety. “Miko…”

“You can’t leave!” Miko rushed towards the massive giant, even wrapping her arms around a pede. Or rather, extended her arms across the metal. “You’re my partner! You can’t break up the band!”

Lennox meant to stand to pry the girl off the Autobot and explain, but a choked sob came from the boy. His face disappeared back into his knees. The man sighed. He knew how to command trained men and follow protocol, but dealing with emotional teenagers…

“Look,” the commander tried, “if we’re going to save Jack, we’re going to have to save the Autobots first—”

“Bulkhead can take them!” Miko argued. “Right, Bulk?”

“Erm…” the poor Autobot stammered.

“Miko,” a deep, rich voice rumbled.

The humans looked up to see Optimus Prime kneeling over them, once again trying to make himself shrink his massive size. Unrestrained tears were spilling from the girl’s eyes, trying to glare at the leader but failed to be intimidating.

“Understand under dire circumstances, dire decisions must be made,” the sage explained patiently. “We formulated this plan when we arrived in Jasper. And for our safety—and for yours—we must follow through it.”

“But you promised to protect us!” Miko protested. “You’re our guardians!”

Lennox and Fowler exchanged solemn glances. The whole reason the children were paired with an Autobot was so that the aliens could guard them from their mortal enemy, should the Decepticons decide to target the humans. That was a concern now more than ever. However, an active military base was no place for children. Especially considering their existence was supposed to be kept secret…

Lennox shut his eyes and breathed through his nose. Hell, they were children. He had made a vow as an Army Ranger to protect innocent civilians. He had a daughter of his own. Just thinking of the idea if something ever happened to Annabelle… The man’s stomach churned and he shook his head.
“We’ll put them under protective custody,” he decided.

“William…” Fowler murmured under his breath, shooting him a look.

Lennox recognized that warning glare. If the children were brought to NEST, then as field commander, it was the lieutenant colonel’s duty to answer for them. But he rather have his badge taken, rather than have young blood on his hands.

“Ratchet, can you fire up a groundbridge, please?” Lennox requested, standing up and turning to the medic. “We need to evacuate you immediately.”

“A sound decision,” the old Autobot nodded. He moved towards the groundbridge’s controls.

Lennox didn’t expect to hear the sound of transformation. It didn’t come from above him. It came from behind.

Raf let out a gasp and Miko a shrill yell as the television came to life with a furious screech.

“Laserbeak!” Bulkhead exclaimed.

Lennox yelped as he fell to all fours as the bird-like Decepticon swooped over him. Fowler yelled as he was blatantly knocked to the floor. Immediately there was the sound of several cannons engaging, a couple even firing towards the ceiling. Laserbreak skillfully dodged the bolts of energon, diving towards the groundbridge controls. Ratchet gasped and lunged forward, but he was too late.

Laserbeak fired a volley of red energon, sending the computer up in flames. Screens went dark and there was a sputter of protest before the hum of the machine went silent.

“I needed that!” Ratchet complained. He was furious enough to shift his servo to a blade, but the flyer soared out of reach, cackling.

Only to glide into the hard fist of Optimus Prime.

The flyer screeched as it was sent back to the ground. Lennox ducked a second time and Bumblebee swiped up his partner, as the Decepticon crashed into its original spot in a tangle of wings and claws.

“Get it!” Lennox shouted as he jumped to his feet and pounced towards the fallen flyer. Fowler quickly followed his example.

Laserbeak just spread its wings when the combined weight of two full grown men landed on its back. The Decepticon screamed in fury and thrashed, spiked tail whipping in the air. Lennox hissed as it sliced across his back and the sharp edges of its armor cut into his skin. The man snatched the flailing tail and tucked underneath his belly, leaning more of his weight on the wing. Laserbeak squawked in protest.

“Got you now, you ugly turkey!” Fowler exclaimed triumphantly, settling on the being’s other wing.

“What is that thing?” Miko gasped, staring at it with a mix of fear and fascination.

“Soundwave’s symbiote, Laserbeak,” Optimus introduced in a growl.

The cassette wailed. Fowler winced at the metallic, high-pitched sound right in his ear.

“Does he come with a ‘mute’ button?” the federal agent asked.

In open rebellion, the little Decepticon cried again. Lennox cringed. The caterwauls came one after
another, until even a couple of the Autobots cringed. Bumblebee recoiled and Bulkhead gripped his head with his servos.

“Will someone please silence him?” Ratchet demanded exasperatedly, cringing.

“On it,” Arcee confirmed, transforming her arm into a blaster.

By now Laserbeak had completely stopped struggling, just screeching and crying, like a hatchling that had fallen out of the nest. Lennox’s heart stopped. \textit{Wait}.

“Fowler, let him go!” the lieutenant colonel gasped, already jumping off the distressed cassette.

“What are you—” the other man tried to demand, only for Laserbeak to use the new leverage to hit him in the face.

He grunted as he was tossed to the floor, a gash on his temple, the Decepticon leaping into the air. Just as the groundbridge fired up with a flash of light.

Lennox realized that was impossible. Laserbeak destroyed—

The Autobots whirled around as one, cannons raised, just as a tall, thin figure stepped through the portal.

\textbf{Soundwave.}

With a squawk, Laserbeak landed on the extended arm. He rubbed against his master, purring and chirping happily. The Autobots froze at the sight, at the Decepticon that had just walked into their base so calmly. Soundwave was even completely ignoring them, focused on fussing over his symbiote for injuries. Apparently Arcee saw her chance.

The motorcycle let out a battle cry as she lunged for the distracted trespasser. Only for a cable to eject from Soundwave’s torso. Its clamps attached to her chassis and the little Autobot screamed as electricity coursed through her.

It was Bulkhead and Ratchet that responded next, charging at the Decepticon at two different angles, weapons engaged. Only for a second tentacle to reach out. Both of them wailed as they suffered the same treatment as their comrade. Optimus Prime stepped forward, activating his cannon.

“Fowler, Lennox, get the children to safety!” he bellowed.

Lennox didn’t have to be told twice. Bumblebee gently exchanged Raf, the military commander plucking the small boy from his grip. Fowler, meanwhile, had to strongarm Miko towards the elevator shaft. Only the humans never got there.

Suddenly a thin, black figure fell from the ceiling, landing in their path with a horrible \textit{clang}. Lennox flinched back at the sharp appendages slicing the air in front of him.

“What do we have here?” the femme purred. \textbf{Airachnid.}

He looked back to the Autobots for help, only to see they had their own problems. Without warning, the groundbridge flashed again—and again and again and again. Lennox’s blood turned to ice as a dozen identical Decepticons stormed into the base, blasters primed. They formed a rough circle around the Autobots, settling their glares on the prisoners. There were two more flashes: revealing a spotless red mech and a greyish-blue one as large as Bulkhead. Knock Out and Breakdown.
“Told you they were hiding in a hole,” Breakdown quipped to his partner.

“Usually not my taste,” Knock Out drawled, “but it does have a certain allure.”

Lennox watched Arcee struggle to her pedes, her optics brightening dangerously. Her gaze scanned the invading party as the groundbridge closed, noticing the absence of a titanic figure.

“Where is Megatron?” she snarled.

There was a dark chuckle, coming from Airachnid.

“Lord Megatron is currently seeing to his new pet,” the spider-bot answered, in a sadistic, taunting tone. “I dare say he has formed quite an attachment to the fleshling.”

The statement made Arcee growl menacingly. “Jack is not yours.”

“You know, I don’t think Jack wants to come back,” Airachnid purred as she used her additional limbs to climb over the catwalks to Arcee. “He felt so abandoned… Megatron had to calm the poor thing down from hysterics.”

Lennox knew the Decepticon was merely toying with her enemy, like a cat playing with a caught mouse. Arcee trembled with rage and her optics flared, like the femme had dug her claws underneath her armor.

“Let Jack go…” the little Autobot growled, lowly, menacingly.

“Oh, Arcee,” Airachnid chided. In a blink of eye, she reached out, framing Arcee’s face with her servos. The Autobot tried to recoil, but the Decepticon’s grip was too strong. “I think you should worry about yourself first.”

Lennox dared to take his eyes off the quarreling femmes to observe the standoff between them. It seemed hopeless. Bulkhead and Ratchet were still on the floor, pinned underneath the barrels of the Vehicons. Bumblebee had his servos to his sides in submission, but still glared at his captors. Optimus Prime had not moved a single wire the entire time, but he kept darting his gaze between his comrades and his captors. No doubt the leader was concerned for his team’s wellbeing more than anything, even if the mighty Prime had to bend to his enemy.

It was hopeless.

“What do we do?” Miko whined, looking back and forth like she was trying to see everywhere at once.

The humans were being blatantly ignored, probably not seen as a threat. Lennox couldn’t argue with that. Miko and Raf had no combat training whatsoever. The commander and Fowler were armed, but only with a standard handgun. Definitely not enough firepower to damage the giants looming over him. If anything, a bullet would cause as much harm as a mosquito bite on a human.

“Lennox, when you called back-up, you called everyone, right?” Fowler asked in a low hiss, careful not be overheard. The NEST commander’s heart was hammering in his chest.

“Yes,” he replied.

Now they just had to get here. Before the Decepticons could execute Team Prime and level the entire silo.
“If you’re going to terminate her, Airachnid,” Breakdown suddenly called, “go ahead and get it over with. I don’t want to waste all day here.”

Airachnid grinned, revealing fangs. Suddenly she leaned forward, pressing her lips against Arcee’s audial receptor. Lennox was the closest to the pair, and he had to strain to hear what she hissed.

“Be assured, we’ll take good care of Jack,” the Decepticon purred. “He will make a fine Decepticon…”

Then something happened that Lennox had never seen before. Suddenly Arcee’s optics lined with red. The foreign color mixed with the bright blue of her optics, turning them into a tainted purple.

With a ear-splitting screech, the Autobots shoved against her offender and raised her claws, raking them down Airachnid’s chassis. The spider-bot yelled in pain, stumbling back, but kept her footing. She snatched Arcee’s wrists, pushing back, but the Autobot was fueled by fury and hate. The two grappled against each other like a pair of wrestlers, trying to dominate the other with strength alone.

Knock Out merely rolled his optics at the display. “Oh, great, now look at what you did!”

“You think the Autobot’s gonna win?” Breakdown asked.

“If we’re lucky.”

Only Decepticons would bet against their own comrade. Lennox saw Optimus Prime bristle, no doubt noticing his captors’ distraction. Soundwave raised a crackling tendril, preparing to break up the fight if need be.

Arcee was shoved up against the wall, hissing as Airachnid impeded a couple of her spiked appendages between the gaps of her armor. The two-wheeler was not deterred, though, pressing a heel against the wall. She used the leverage to push off, sending her frame barreling against Airachnid. The Decepticon screeched as she was dragged to the ground, Arcee settling her weight on top of her with a deep growl. A blade ejected.

A cable shot out, only to be snatched by a black servo. Optimus’s blade engaged, slicing through Soundwave’s cable like it was butter. The silent Decepticon did not scream, did not growl, or even make a sound. He merely stumbled back, flailing in pain, as his severed tendril waved sporadically. Sparks and energon poured from it. Laserbeak shrieked in concern.

All hell broke loose.

Bulkhead leaped to his pedes, lunging on top of Breakdown. The two went down with an earthquake-like tremor. Despite his old age, Ratchet was able to close the distance between him and Knock Out in a single leap, slicing his blade across the Decepticon medic’s chassis. The Aston Martin shouted something about his finish. Bumblebee spun on his heels, sending a volley of kicks and punches at the Vehicons around him. The children screamed when the pair of men jumped on top of them to shield from the burning energon flying in all directions.

“I think it’s a good time to leave now!” Fowler yelled over the noise of battle.

There were the clangs and crunching of metal, the high-pitched sounds of burning energon cutting through the air, and the growls and hisses and bellows of the Cybertronians. Honestly, Lennox didn’t see taking the elevator as a safe bet. It only took one stray shot to send the whole thing down. And they couldn’t make a break for it—not without being squished underneath the large pedes of the quarrelling aliens. They needed cover.
Lennox dared to raise his head and look around, only to be greeted by writhing metal giants in every direction. Where were reinforcements?

His question was answered. Through the deafening sounds of the fight, he heard the faint growl of an engine. The human’s heart sped up, recognizing that sound. Only he had that kind of horsepower. The growl came closer and closer, louder and louder. Even a couple drones paused and tilted their heads curiously. A pair of headlights appeared in the tunnel.

The Vehicons turned, raising their weapons, only to be greeted by a broad, bulky form. One fell to the ground, a burning hole in its spark chamber. One’s head was crushed instantly from the force of a punch alone. Lennox almost sank to his knees in relief at the sight of the Autobot. He had all-black armor, with only color coming from silver rims and hard, ice-blue optics.

“Ironhide!” Lennox yelled at the top of his lungs.

The Autobot weapons specialist glanced in his direction, immediately taking in his human commanding officer was stranded in the heat of battle. Completely ignoring the struggles of his compatriots, the Autobot stormed towards the group of humans. Ironhide was forced to pause as Airachnid fell landed in his path, after being thrown across the space by Arcee. The Insecticon hissed at the larger mech, appendages raised as if to make herself look bigger. Ironhide merely glared down at her with contempt.

He raised his arm, which shifted into a cannon, humming with power. Before he could fire, a small, silver figure fell from the catwalks. Airachnid screeched as she was shoved out of the way. Not before a pair of twin blades sliced all eight of her appendages. The Insecticon screamed in fury and agony.

“Damn, I’m good,” Sideswipe purred.

Ironhide merely continued his march.

“You can’t do anything without me, can you?” the Autobot chided. “I left you alone for just a few —”

“Save it!” Lennox barked. “Get the kids out of here!”

The weapons specialist noticed the small forms quivering being the lieutenant colonel. With a curt nod, Ironhide transformed into a GMC Topkick truck, opening the passenger door invitingly. Only for the pair of teenagers to hesitate.

“What about Bumblebee?” Raf demanded.

“T’m not leaving Bulkhead!” Miko protested.

“They’ll be fine!” Lennox assured, but it was more impatient than he meant it to be. “Just go!”

“Anytime now, kiddies,” Ironhide called, not trying to hide his restlessness.

The Japanese girl looked between the stranger and her partner.

“Miko, go!” Bulkhead ordered, still grappling with Breakdown. He struck his mace against the Decepticon’s head, sending him back down. “You can trust him!”

The girl’s bottom lip quivered, but realized she had no choice. Raf tugged her by the arm as they made a break to the Autobot, diving into his cab. Ironhide snapped the door shut and pivoted his
wheels. With a roar of the engine, the truck tore down the tunnel, the way he came. No doubt Lennox would get a lecture later, that he denied the trigger-happy Autobot to enter the battle.

“Now what do we do?” Fowler demanded, gesturing between them. Lennox pulled out his pistol.

“We start shooting,” the commander decided.

The federal agent’s eyes widened, but Lennox ignored him as he took aim at the red medic, whose sawblade sliced across Ratchet’s arm. He never had the chance, as suddenly there was a high-pitched shriek above. He yelled as claws dug into his hands, prying his weapon from his grip. The man was knocked to the floor, the gun clattering to ground.

Laserbeak cackled, landing on the railing of the catwalk above him. His victorious smirk disappeared as lead bullets assaulted his face.

“Hey, Turkey, how would you like to be stuffed with lead?” Fowler taunted as he fired another volley of rounds.

The cassette hissed and shrieked as he spread his wings and a set of twin barrels ejected from his chest.

“He, oh…” Lennox cringed.

Both humans dived for cover as superheated energon rained down on them. Lennox ducked behind the couch, only for the headrest to be evaporated in seconds.

“A little help here!” he screamed.

Like God himself had heard him, a servo came down on top of the cassette. Laserbeak wailed as his wing was crushed. A long, sharp blade came next, slicing across his chest and sending him flying. Lennox dared to look out from his hiding spot to see a flash of red.

“Little pest,” Mirage sniffed.

Laserbeak landed on the ground, whining pitifully. Sparks and energon came from the gash on his belly and his optics flickered. Lennox looked over to see Soundwave, who was in a heavy hand-to-hand combat fight with Optimus Prime, freeze. Before the human could blink, the TIC closed the distant between him and his symbiote. The Decepticon scooped up the wounded bird with surprising gentleness, holding him to his chest. Suddenly Laserbeak transformed into a piece of armor, a perfect fit on Soundwave’s chassis.

Around them, the other Decepticons began to fall. Ratchet went from attacking his counterpart to avoiding Knock Out’s assaults. The Decepticon medic snarled as he swiped his crackling staff at the old Autobot. Ratchet just barely managed to step out of the way, just as Bulkhead shoved Breakdown back. Right into Knock Out’s stasis staff.

The large Decepticon gasped as paralyzing electricity coursed through him and he fell to the floor with a loud clang.

“Oops…” Knock Out muttered.

He turned back to face his opponent, only to be greeted with Ratchet’s fist. The medic was sent to the floor alongside his assistant. Meanwhile, Soundwave and the wounded Airachnid slid towards their fallen comrades. All around the base, the greying pieces of Vehicons littered the floor. Leaving the surviving Decepticons to be surrounded by seven angry Autobots.
“I think this was supposed to have gone better,” Breakdown moaned, struggling to his pedes.

“Um, retreat?” Knock Out offered.

“Soundwave! Groundbridge, now!” Airachnid hissed.

The communication officer’s visor lit up with schematics. The groundbridge appeared once again, behind the cowering Decepticons.

“We’ll be sure to tell the little J you said ‘hello,’” Knock Out mocked, give one last taunt as he and Breakdown jumped through the gateway.

Airachnid was not far behind them. Soundwave was more reluctant, not turning his back to the enemy and fixing them with an opticless glare. Realizing he was abandoned and hopelessly outnumbered, the probabilities against him, the silent Decepticon disappeared.

Arcee’s let out that furious growl and her violet optics flashed. She lunged forward, transforming into a motorcycle mid-air.

“Arcee!” Optimus barked, but it was too late.

The Autobot slipped into the portal, and the groundbridge disappeared.

___

_Stupid, obnoxious, goody-goody, fleshling-loving Autobots!_ Knock Out cursed as he stepped out of the groundbridge.

It was going to take him _joors_ to buff his decimated finish! Even worse, Megatron would have his head! The Master would not be pleased to hear not a _single_ Autobot was terminated in the raid, when he was assured that the human facility would be leveled. Oh, could this day get any worse—

Knock Out grunted as something slammed into his back, _hard_, sending him face-first into the floor. Breakdown shouted and Airachnid hissed and there were several _clangs_ of missed attacks. The medic glanced up, only to see a human two-wheeler—a motorcycle—tear down the corridor and disappear from sight.

The Autobot, Arcee.

“Scrap…”
Arcee sped down the corridors of the *Nemesis* at full speed. She ignored the drones that yelped and flailed and fired at her, instead extending all her sensors to scan the foreign surroundings.

Where was Jack? Where was Megatron keeping him? Airachnid had said that the twisted tyrant had taken the human for himself. Was Jack with Megatron?

Fine, Arcee would just terminate the Decepticon leader and end this conflict once and for all. She remembered Megatron’s jeer, that Jack’s reluctance to do so is what caused this whole mess. Arcee could not blame her charge.

Jack was no stranger to the tragedies of war, but he was a stranger to its horrors. He was not a fighter, and certainly not a killer. Ending a war was not his responsibility and did not deserve to be on his shoulders. It was not his burden to bear. Arcee would not allow Megatron make Jack believe otherwise, and forced the human to suffer the consequences.

It was her duty to protect the boy. She promised Optimus, June, and herself that she would keep him safe. That he would never be hurt by war again.

She broke her promise. Jack was a prisoner, all because of her failure.

Arcee would find him. She would save him, and protect him. And she would end the tyranny of Megatron.

The motorcycle added a kick of speed. Suddenly there was movement up ahead and a line of drones formed in front of her, blocking the entire corridor and weapons drawn. They fired when she drew closer, but the quick Autobot weaved through the rain of energon. Arcee raised her front tire off the ground, leaping up and crashing into a Vehicon.

She transformed as she sent the drone to the ground, unsheathing her blades. She sliced the Decepticon’s neck cables through and through, only to leap off her victim as a sword came down. Arcee sent a kick into the closest Eradicon, crushing its helm against the black wall. She used her other pede to shove off, flipping midair over another. She sliced into his spinal strut as she came back down, rendering him immobile.

Her HUD alerted her of a target lock, and she jumped out of the way as the last drone standing fired at her. She rolled into a crouch before launching herself at the Decepticon twice her size. She was too fast for the trooper to follow, yelping as she forced to him the ground. She settled on his chassis, claws wrapped around his neck cables.

“Where’s Jack?” she demanded. When the Vehicon did not reply, she raised her blade and narrowed her violet eyes. “Answer me!”

Megatron’s quarters were sealed at all times. No one was to enter his private chambers without his permission—permission he rarely gave. It was for several reasons. It was to prevent any curious optics or any thieves from violating his quarters, or even assassins that desired to attack him when they believed his guard was down. Or to prevent his recharge from being disturbed.
Megatron lay on his berth, Jack pressed against his chassis.

The youngling was secured against his Decepticon insignia, right above the spark and under his servo. The human breathed steadily and his eyes were closed in sleep. Megatron was satisfied. Until there was a ping from his com-link.

“My lord,” Knock Out’s voice came, hesitant and fearful. “I hate to be a nuisance… but there seems to be a, um, development.”

Megatron snarled in impatience. He would have growled, but was mindful the disturbance could wake Jack.


“It appears a certain two-wheeler has come onto the ship… uninvited.”

“WHAT?!”

Jack murmured and his eyes fluttered open. Realizing his mistake, Megatron forced his bristling plating to relax and he stroked a gentle claw down the boy’s back.

“Go to sleep,” the tyrant ordered. The youngling closed his eyes.

The warlord’s first instinct was to order the immediate termination of the interloper. Should Jack see an Autobot, especially his treasured partner, Arcee, he would no doubt question his current predicament. Furthermore, should he be allowed to witness her destruction, the human would openly protest.

“See to it that Arcee is escorted off this ship immediately,” Megatron ordered. He closed the link, telling his word was final.

The warlord closed his optics once again, sending protocols to his systems to begin shutting down for recharge. Halfway through the process, energon fire sounded outside his quarters. Primus, they were loud. Megatron adamantly ignored it.

Then there was a bang at his door. Then another. And another. With an unpleasant sound, they were pried open.

“MEGATRON!”

Arcee didn’t know when to give up. Jack started awake. Megatron groaned resentfully.

“Regardless of what you may have been told, I do not enjoy having my recharge interrupted,” the Decepticon lord growled, refusing to open his optics.


“Arcee…?” the human in question slurried, shifting underneath Megatron’s claws. The titan pressed him back down.

“Your pet belongs to me now,” the tyrant proclaimed.

There was a furious screech and a series of rapid thuds as the little Autobot surged forward. Megatron reluctantly onlined his optics, only to see Arcee pouncing towards him, blades ejecting. He kicked her away. The two-wheeler shrieked as she was sent back, skidding across the ground, sending sparks into the air.
“Arcee!” Jack yelped. His next shout was directed at Megatron. “Stop!”

The dictator ignored him as he rose to his pedes. He deposited the human on the berth, assured he would stay put, ignoring his displeased chirps. The titan neared the runt of a Cybertronian, unsheathing his sword. Groaning, Arcee picked herself off the floor, her optics flickering. Megatroncocked an optic ridge when he noticed the purple hue.

“So it seems someone’s emotions have been getting the better of them,” he chuckled darkly.

Arcee merely snarled, baring fangs and growling deeply. She lunged at the warlord. Megatron immediately swiped his sword, but the little runt merely ducked underneath the wide arc, slashing her blade across the wires of his stabilizers. The Decepticon hissed as his leg groaned from the compromised balance. He did not let it hinder him, though, as he leaned on his other pede.

He spun around just in time to block one of the femme’s kicks with a broad arm. She pushed off, flipping backwards. Her pedes just barely managed to touch the ground when Megatron sent a vicious uppercut to her chassis, sending her into the wall. Arcee grunted in pain as she collided with limbs spread, creating a broad dent.

“Megatron, please, don’t!” Jack begged, helpless from his position. He paced his spot on the berth. He would glance down at the floor as if he considered jumping off, only to blanch when he realized how high up he was.

“Be quiet,” Megatron snapped in his direction. The human flinched at the harsh growl, but did what he was told.

The warlord casually neared the fallen Autobot. The femme was on her servos and knees, groaning in pain. When she noticed the Decepticon’s approach, she tried to climb to her pedes, but it was too late.

With a single servo, Megatron pinned her arms to her sides and slammed her against the wall. The runt protested and wiggled to free herself, but it was hopeless. Jack whimpered.

The tyrant raised his catch so that their optics met, leaning forward so that there was only a few units between them. He dropped his voice so that only Arcee could hear.

“What does it feel like, to fail to protect something that was yours? To lose yet another partner?” Megatron taunted. He reveled the flare of her poisoned optics. “I made Jack a promise to spare him the pain of watching his dear allies die, but it will only be fitting for him to witness your destruction.”

Arcee screeched—an awful, high-pitched sound that even had Jack covering his ears. She flailed in her captor’s grip, until an arm ripped free. Before Megatron could seize it, she shifted it into a blaster and aimed it at his helm.

In reflex more than anything, the ex-gladiator shut his optics and turned his head, even raising a shielding arm, but it was too late. A burst of energon assaulted his helm, toxic and heated. Thankfully, he was more armored than most mechs and the attack merely scraped the side of his head, so there was no damage to his processor. The same could not said for his optic.

Megatron bellowed in rage and agony as the lenses of his left optic were vaporized, effectively ruining his vision. Heat burned the side of his face, telling the attack had melted the surrounding armor. Instinct getting the best of him, he clawed at the painful wound, unknowingly loosening his grip on his prisoner.

Arcee pried his silver talons off of her and dropped to the floor. Before Megatron could snatch her,
she flew towards the berth. Jack yelped as he was scooped up into her arms. She leaped off, transforming as she landed on the ground, her charge in the saddle.

The Autobot and the human sped off, Megatron’s enraged, thundering roar following them.

Jack was terribly confused. He had been dreaming, of gigantic skyscrapers and bloody fights, only for Arcee’s cry to pierce through the horrors of war. At first, he thought she was another hallucination of the patch. But the rage that filled her voice and how she deliver acute, painful blows to Megatron, the boy realized she was real.

How did she find him? How did she get here? What was she doing here?

He watched helplessly as Megatron attempted to terminate her. No! He didn’t want that! Arcee was his partner, his friend. Jack was mad at her, he didn’t want her dead! And now the warlord would destroy them both.

“You do have an escape plan, right?” Jack asked.

“Working on it!” Arcee spat back.

She was tearing down the dark corridors of the Nemesis at a breakneck speed, disregarding the frail human on her back. Jack just kept his head down and held onto the handles for dear life. He dared to glance over his shoulder, expecting to see Megatron’s titanic form sprinting after them. There was no sign of the warlord, but several dark vehicles turned into view.

“We got ‘Cons on our tail!” he warned.

“Not for long,” Arcee vowed.

Before he could ask what she meant, she suddenly veered off into a branching hallway.

“Whoa!” Jack yelped at the violent turn, his leg almost scrapping against the ground as the motorcycle listed.

Before Arcee could properly straighten out, she took another turn—and another and another. Jack’s shoulders began to hurt at the jarring motions, his knuckles turning white and he pressed his legs tightly against the frame beneath him. As his guardian promised, they quickly lost sight of their pursuers, but the Nemesis was crawling with troopers.

Jack shouted in fright as energon and claws were sent their way, but Arcee effectively dodged all the onslaughts. It was still unpleasant experience for the teenager, as the attacks came a hair-length from catching him.

“Why don’t you just call a groundbridge?” he demanded, wanting the absurd, deadly game to stop.

“Can’t,” Arcee replied. “Base is down.”

“What?”

How were they going to get off this boat?

Somehow they made it to the upper hull. Jack squinted his eyes with a whine as the harsh, white light of the sun assaulted him. Arcee drove down the length of the flight deck before skidding to a halt. She transformed while her charge was still seated, snatching him midair and gently placing him on the ground. Despite the warmth of the outside air, the boy paled.
Below them were gigantic thrusters of the *Nemesis*, a loud, deafening hum coming from the purpled-hued cylinders. Jack twisted his face from the sharp smell of burning ozone. However, his focus was on the sight beyond.

The *Nemesis* had “docked” in a large valley, just wide enough for the massive warship to hide between the stone mountains. Below them, Jack saw the black dots of drones crisscrossing the ground, some operating drillers or pushing carts. Even from this height, he saw the brilliant glow of energon crystals. Apparently the Decepticon warship had made a much needed refuel run, parking a couple miles above the Earth instead of several thousand. Still, it was way too high for Jack’s comfort.

“Now what?” he asked his partner, who was glaring between the distant ground and her surroundings.

Then both beings froze at sound of heavy pedes behind them. Jack gulped and Arcee growled as they whirled around.

Despite half his face was scorched and one optic was darkened with partial blindness, Megatron looked as intimidating as ever as he glowered at them. He walked slowly, his leg limping, allowing a squadron of Eradicons to catch up. They formed a line between their master and the escapees, blasters raised.

“A pity you are incapable of flight,” Megatron taunted.

“Like that’s going to stop me,” Arcee hissed. The Autobot wrapped her servos around Jack’s middle, plucking him off the ground.

“What are y—aaahhhh!”

Jack’s question was cut off with a terrified scream as Arcee vaulted over the side of the ship. Every organ in the boy’s body jumped to his throat. Wind roared in his ears, assaulting his eardrums and popping from the sudden change in pressure. His throat quickly turned raw as he wailed the whole way down.

Arcee’s arms were wrapped tightly around her charge as she landed on her pedes. Jack had his eyes shut tight, fingers digging into the gaps of her armor until his knuckles turned white. The terrain was sloped, having the Autobot skid down a forested ravine—throwing dirt and leaves and other fallen debris into the air. Eventually her pede struck a root or stone or something, as she yelped as her leg was yanked away, knocking her off course.

Like ragdolls, the human and Transformer rolled down the steep ravine as one. The bright sky and dark earth flipped back and forth like someone was flicking a light switch. It all came to a sudden, violent halt as Arcee’s back slammed into a broad tree. She grunted as her delicate wings were crushed behind her. Jack continued to cling on to her like a lifeline, like if he let go, he would realize it was all a dream and he would awake on the *Nemesis*. A comforting hand stroked his back.

“Are you alright?” Arcee murmured, her voice filled with concern.

For a moment, Jack didn’t know how to answer that. The world was still spinning, and he was shaking, from either the adrenaline rush or the terror.

Instead, he swallowed the bile in his throat and replied, “Y-yeah…”

“Come on, we need to get out of here,” Arcee continued, turning back into the hasty tone of a soldier.
She was already righting herself, gently pulling Jack to his feet as well. Reluctantly, the human released her and looked around. They were a thick forest, the ground covered in fallen leaves and debris. Light filtered through the thick canopy, dancing across the forest floor. Through the wall of trees, he heard the muffled sounds of the Decepticons’ drilling operation. And the high-pitched thunder of Cybertronian jets.

Arcee automatically transformed into a motorcycle and Jack promptly got back on. He didn’t even fully settle as the two-wheeler sped off. The terrain was uneven and the Autobot weaved through the trees, slowing her down. Above them, Eradicons flew over like rockets. The canopy was too thick for them to land, and Jack doubted they could even see their hunt. However, he glanced up to see black streaks race over the forest, along with a gigantic, silver object.

Eventually the Decepticons got frustrated. Jack yelled as suddenly energon rained down on them. Most of the attacks were blind, knocking over trees or lighting foliage on fire. Occasionally a bolt came too close and Arcee had to veer off course. But not once did the motorcycle slow down, even as she stayed in the thick underbrush of the forest. More and more distance came between them and the Nemesis. And their pursuers.

Jack’s tense muscles uncoiled one by one as the drone of Cybertronian engines grew fainter and fainter. He did not dare breathe until the rumbles faded altogether. There was a whole five minutes of silence, save for the sound of Arcee’s engine, the speeding tires racing over unpaved earth. Finally—

“I think we lost them,” Arcee sighed.

Jack had no idea where they were. He could only determine they definitely weren’t in the United States. The mountains were too tall to be the Appalachian, but they didn’t the same jagged rocks of the Rockies. And there was too much vegetation to be the Sierras. There were a lot of valleys and creeks, having Arcee either go around or stubbornly push through if it wasn’t hazardous.

There was no sign of civilization. Not a town, a house, or a cabin. There wasn’t even a single soul of a human. They eventually came across an unpaved road, weaving through the valleys. Noticing the sky was absent of Seekers, Arcee took the risk to follow it, but stayed close to the forest in case they needed to duck into shelter. Which proved to be a wise decision, their flight was not without incident.

An echo of a thruster rumbled through the gorge. Without hesitation, Arcee dived into the closest brush, pulling her EM field in as tight as possible. Just in time for a dark, slender shape to appear on the other side of the valley, that suspiciously looked like a predator drone. It wasn’t until the flyer vanished behind the mountain and the whine faded into silence that the pair continued on.

Most of the trip was in silence, both of them too tense to hold any conversation that wasn’t more than idle. Jack’s eyes never left the skies; Arcee’s headlights never left the road. The boy’s first thought was to contact the others—but it was shot down quickly. He had lost his phone when he was captured; Arcee feared the ‘Cons would be monitoring nearby frequencies, including her own. It wouldn’t do much good, anyway.

Jack was chilled to his core as his guardian described the Decepticon’s attempted raid on the base. They had tried to evacuate, only for the groundbridge to be rendered useless by Laserbeak, who had apparently infiltrated the silo. The symbiote had cloaked his signature to hide from the Autobots’ scanners, even though he was right underneath their noses. The Decepticons invaded and braced to execute their prisoners when NEST forces arrived. Jack didn’t think he heard her right.
“Wait, there are other Autobots on Earth?” he gasped.

“What? You really thought we were the only ones?” Arcee replied.

“Well… yeah…”

“It was a security precaution. We separated into forces in different regions of the globe, just in case… well, you know.”

“So what do we do now since there’s no groundbridge?” Jack asked.

“We get as much distance between us and the Decepticons as possible,” Arcee replied, falling back on protocol. “We find a way to contact the others, and find a way home.”

*Home.* Just the word made Jack’s stomach churn with sickness. And it caused fear to stab through his heart.

“What about Mom?” he demanded. “Does she even know where I am?”

“Agent Fowler told her,” his guardian answered. She must have felt his panic, because she quickly assured, “She was far away when the base was attacked.”

Part of Jack was relieved to hear his mother was okay, but his stomach coiled in a tight knot. She had lost it the first time he was kidnapped. God only knew how terrified she was. Especially if she caught wind that the silo was attacked.

Jack shut his eyes tight as guilt struck his heart. He was trying to protect the Autobots, instead he had almost gotten them killed. *And* he betrayed his country. Megatron had played him, *again*, and he had fallen for it. Was there even an option to go back, that didn’t lead to prison? Did the Autobots even want him back? Optimus had no trouble surrendering the child to his mortal enemy…

A headache formed behind his eyes. Jack felt nothing for respect for the Prime, but *why.* Optimus was one of the most powerful Cybertronians, in the galaxy. And he didn’t bother to fight. After an entire war on his home planet, tearing it apart just so he could—

The pain flared and Jack shut his eyes, trying to shake the negative thoughts away. No, Optimus wasn’t like that. He tried to protect the human. Right…?

Suddenly nausea took the teenager in a vice grip. He wheezed as he leaned over, only for bile to rise to his throat. His head swam, helpless against the migraine pounding his skull.

*Where are you, my pet?*

“Jack,” Arcee called.

The human blinked and swallowed the bile with a cough. He straightened in the saddle, but still held on to the handles in a tight grip. The spell disappeared as quickly as it came, allowing the teenager to notice the motorcycle had stopped on a hill.

“Look,” the robot-in-disguise pointed out, turning her wheel.

Jack followed the gesture, looking down at the valley below them. There, nestled between rolling hills of crops and lakes, was a village.
“This should be fun,” Jack muttered under his breath, as he walked down the only road to the cluster of wooden and stone buildings. Arcee was beside him, the teenager still gripping on the handles. He decided to be slow and cautious and nonthreatening as possible—last thing he needed to give a group of people a heart attack by speeding into their place on a motorcycle.

Jack’s heart sank when he realized just how far away from home he was. He identified the small group of people that greeted him as Chinese.

Only problem was that he didn’t speak a lick of Mandarin, and there were only a couple that spoke sparse English. The villagers were confused to say the least. He didn’t blame them—an American teenager alone with a spotless motorcycle, who didn’t have any idea where he was or how to navigate the mountains. And he didn’t even speak the native language.

It was a twenty minute game of charades along with basic conversational words until Jack was finally pointed to a map and the only phone (one that could make international calls, at least) in the rural village. The teenager was guilty to destroy their phone bill, but accepted with gratitude and dialed a number.

He knew it was risky. But the Decepticons were likely monitoring for Autobot communications, not human. It was unlikely they would pick up a single call in such a rural area to another random cell phone. Jack called three times. The first one rung and rung and was never answered. The second lost connection before it even went through. Jack sighed in disappointment and had to will himself to try one last time. There was a click.

“Agent William Fowler.”

“Fowler!” the army brat gasped with relief, almost collapsing to his knees. “It’s Jack!”

For a moment, he feared the series of sputters that filled the line was static. Then Fowler’s voice came back, loud and clear.

“J-Juh-Jack?!?” the government agent stammered. More sputters. “Where the HELL are you?!?”

“Uh, China,” Jack answered hesitantly.

“How in the name of Uncle Sam’s star-bangled hat are you in CHINA?!!”

The boy had to pull the phone away from his ear with a cringe at the octave that the man managed to hit.

“Long story. Short version: me and Arcee have ‘Cons on our tail need to get out of here before Megatron finds us.”

That seemed to sober Fowler enough for the man to let out a long sigh and speak at a normal volume, but no less stressed.

“Can you tell me where you are in China?”

“A farming village in the mountains,” Jack answered. The army brat pulled out the map he was shown. He said the name of the village three different ways before Fowler finally corrected him. He determined he was in the Greater Khingan Range.

“Look, the Autobots are in transit to a safe location as we speak,” the liaison stated. “And groundbridge’s down so they can’t come to you. Do you think you can get to Beijing?”
Jack traced his finger along the map to see it was southeast of him. Compared to the width of the country, it wasn’t a long drive, except that he had mountains between him and city. And a warship full of angry Decepticons after him.

“I… I think,” he stammered. Fowler took it as a yes.

“There’s a U.S. embassy there. The ambassador knows about the ‘Bots, so she can help you until I get there.”

“What about the ‘Cons?”

“Autobots hit them pretty hard when they came through the door uninvited. It might buy you some time. It helps you’re in the most populated country in the world.”

A country he stuck out in like a sore thumb, especially with an alien vehicle that gave off detectable energy signatures.

“O-Okay,” Jack sighed. Fowler seemed to pick on the shaky tone.

“Don’t worry, son, we’ll bring you home,” the man vowed. “Just keep it together until we get there.”

The army brat nodded, even though he knew the man didn’t see him. He had to stand up now.

“Right.”

“And, kid?”

“Yeah?”

“Semper fi.”

Night had fallen by the time Jack settled onto the hay-stuffed mattress, still in his clothes and curled up in a thin blanket. The family that aided him seemed to pick up on quickly he was lost, and gave him a warm enough welcome. They offered him an extra room, which he accepted graciously, and they stored Arcee outside in the courtyard, underneath the eave of the house. The robot-in-disguise did not dare speak or even move during the entire ordeal. The villagers were none the wiser that she was a sentient being from another planet. At least she was out of sight from any drones.

Jack attempted to sleep. It never came. The boy tossed and turned throughout the duration of the night. Every time he closed his eyes, they would open on their own accord. His brain buzzed with racing, paranoid thoughts.

What if they couldn’t make it Beijing? What if the embassy couldn’t help? What if the Decepticons found them? Megatron was furious. Was it enough to harm Arcee or him or both? Furious enough to kill them? The teen glanced out the window several times, even staring out at the full moon for an hour straight, expecting a black shadow to descend, raining hellfire.

Nothing ever came, but that didn’t stop the twisting of his gut to the point he almost became sick and the headache pounding across his skull. Jack sighed and tried to force his eyes shut.

Only to be greeted with images of a ravaged Cybertron.

The teenager threw off the blanket and jumped to his feet. Knowing his hosts were asleep, he slowly and quietly tiptoed down the stairs. He slipped through the front door, cringing as it let out a loud
“Jack?” Arcee greeted. “What are you doing out here?”

“Couldn’t sleep,” the teenager answered as he walked to the motorcycle.

He sat on the ground, back pressed up against the wall. There was a silence between them for a time, neither felt like talking and neither knew what to say. Jack certainly didn’t know; he couldn’t name the flurry of emotions in his chest. He was finally with Arcee again, his best friend, but he felt so… angry.

“This is all my fault…” the boy muttered.

“Jack—”

“I sold out the Autobots, Arcee. You guys were hurt, and you were almost killed. Then Mom, and Miko, and Raf…”

“You did nothing wrong, Jack,” Arcee argued firmly.

“Why does it feel like I did?”

He curled up in a pathetic ball, wrapping his arms around his knees and placing his chest on top, eyelids drooping. Arcee took the risk to transform into her bipedal mode. There were no gasps or screams, telling they were truly alone.

“You couldn’t have known this was going to happen,” the Autobot said, her voice soft. There was a pause and Arcee like out a staticky sigh. “I was the one that failed to be your guardian.” Jack instinctively wanted to protest, but didn’t know what to say. “I thought if I stayed near you, I was just putting you in more danger. Tailgate, Cliffjumper, they… they died because of me. I could have saved them, and I didn’t.”

Jack glanced up to see Arcee’s optics were dim and narrowed, looking absently at the ground. She was hunched with her wings pressed against her back. His heart clenched. She had told him the story about her former partners—how the cost of war had taken them both. But he never seen a Cybertronian look so depressed. The Autobot looked back up, her voice just as low.

“If I lost you, too… I, I would never forgive myself,” she admitted.

Jack shut his eyes and sighed. “We’re partners, ‘Cee. Partners stick together.” After a pause, he boy opened his eyes. “It’s a military thing, my dad told me about. You always have a buddy—the one that always watches your back, always covers you. He’s your brother. Dad’s buddy… he died right two days before I was born. His name was Jackson Gibbs.” The army brat shrugged. “And well, he meant a lot to Dad…” He looked to his guardian. “I would say you mean a lot to me, Arcee… I mean, you’re my first bike and all.”

It was then the Autobot made a sound he heard only a few times from her—a chuckle. It was short and low, but it was a chuckle all the same.

“And you’re my first human,” Arcee replied, her tone warming with a smile.

Jack’s lips quirked, but he buried his chin back in his knees. There was silence between them for a time.

“I… saw Megatron’s memories,” the human charge admitted, breaking the silence. The brightness of
Arcee’s optics illuminated the ground in front of him.

“What?”

“With that… cordial-whatever psych patch thing.” He didn’t really care what it was called, regardless his rather intimate experience with it.

“Jack… that’s impossible. A Cybertronian’s processor is too complex for such a—a human could never—”

“Well, I don’t know how it happened, but it happened,” Jack interrupted, raising his voice more than he meant to. He lowered it when the light in front of him dimmed. “A lot of it I couldn’t get, but… but it felt like—Megatron really thought he was saving Cybertron.”

“Megatron’s mind is sick and twisted,” Arcee argued, shaking her head. “He was delusional with the idea that he could save Cybertron and bring it back to the Golden Age, even as he destroyed it. It was just an excuse.”

“When he was a gladiator, though, people loved him.”

“No. They revered the Champion of Kaon. A warrior that never lost a battle. He was entertainment, nothing more. Megatron misinterpreted that.”

Jack sighed. “I… I just don’t know. Nothing feels right anymore.”

He tightened his hold on his legs, shivering even though it wasn’t that cold. He was so self-absorbed in his misery, he did not see Arcee shifting. He almost jumped out of his skin when there was a light touch to his shoulder.

Jack glanced up to see calm, comforting blue optics. His guardian gave him a smile he could not read, and gently wrapped an arm around his shoulders. The charge instinctively curled against her chassis, soaking in the warmth of her systems. He closed his eyes and sunk into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Simper fi = Semper Fidelis, meaning "always faithful" or "always loyal." The motto for the United State Marine Corps and used as a motto for many other parties, including other military units.
“UNBELIEVABLE!”

Megatron glared down the line of sorry excuses of Decepticons. Servos hung limply and helms were bowed low, none of them daring to look their lord in the optics—optic. His top warriors were covered in dents and their own energon, whining in pain when they thought he wasn’t listening. All the while, they had nothing to show for it.

Not a single head of an Autobot.

And Jack was gone.

Where are you, my pet?

With a bellow, Megatron struck out a clawed fist, slamming it into the closest victim—what happened to be one of the stations that made up the bridge. Sparks and shrapnel flew as the screen went black with a whine of protest. The Decepticon leader regarded his incompetent subordinates.

Knock Out was trembling before his wrath. Breakdown was still stiff as a statue, probably a lingering side-effect of forced stasis lock. Even Airachnid was uncharacteristically quiet. Soundwave was the only one not present, as he immediately locked himself in his lab to treat Laserbeak. And possibly to avoid another one of his master’s rants. It was only because Megatron knew the Decepticon’s possessiveness over his symbiote and Laserbeak’s usefulness he allowed Soundwave to be spared. He would chastise his third-in-command later.

“Well, Airachnid? Do you have anything to offer?” Megatron glowered, looming over the Insecticon.

“The Autobot reinforcements were unexpected,” his newly-promoted second-in-command explained, slow and cautious and calculating.

Megatron was regretting his decision to allow Airachnid command in the field. A commander should expect dents in the plan and respond accordingly. However, spending most of her time in the shadows, the Decepticon stalked prey from afar until that one moment they lowered their guard. She had little experience with full conventional warfare. However, he rather keep the scheming spider close to him than allow her to hide in her domain.

“So you had more Autobots to terminate, and yet you still failed to deliver me a spark,” Megatron accused venomously.

“I…” Airachnid tried to argue, but finally realized it was futile. She lowered her gaze to her pedes. “I have no excuse, Lord Megatron.”

“No, you do not.”

With that, Megatron stormed off, not without hailing Knock Out. Realizing his medical expertise was required, the mech escorted his lord to the medbay. Fortunately, the warlord’s wounds looked worse than they were. A couple of the wires leading to his leg stabilizers were damaged, but were easily welded. As for his optic, only the upper layer of the lenses was compromised. Knock Out merely had to replace it with a synthetic film, which felt and acted no different than a natural one. It was certainly doable, unlike replacing an entire optic, which was poor Breakdown’s plight. The rest of the repairs were standard—welding and furnishing muddled armor.
“Viola!” Knock Out exclaimed triumphantly as he pulled the polisher away. “Good as new!”

The warlord tentatively touched his faceplates, to confirm as such. Megatron was pleased at his medic’s competence, but was still annoyed. The procedure took too long. Giving plenty of time for Arcee and Jack to flee into the mountains. He had sent patrols and even Soundwave, who finished repairing Laserbeak, only to come out empty. Jack was close. Megatron knew that much.

He raised himself off the slab, just as familiar clanking of pedes neared. The tyrant turned to see Soundwave, returned from a fruitless search. However, the spymaster knew better to approach Megatron without cause. Upon the Decepticon leader’s urging, the visor lit up and a male human voice rung out, one he did not recognize, filled with annoyance.

/“This is an absolute mess. How could this happen? I want the Au-to-bots transferred to NEST headquarters immediately and I want them to stay there. Get Fowler’s ass to D.C. A-SAP.”/

The tyrant chuckled, “So it seems the Autobots’ human allies are displeased with them.”

Optimus was a fool, to depend on such pathetic organics. Fowler. Megatron recognized that human as the one that aided the Autobots time from time. The one Jack showed him in the cortical psychic patch. Soundwave continued on with a recording of the human in question.

/“Can you tell me where you are in China?”/

The next voice perked the Decepticon’s interest.

/“A farming village in the mountains,”/ Jack reported.

The grin widened. Well, that certainly narrowed it down. He was about to relay an order when Soundwave added Fowler’s response.

/“Do you think you can get to Beijing?”/ Jack gave his answer, hesitant and fearful. /“There’s a U.S. embassy there. ”/

Humans made everything so easy. Now Megatron didn’t have to waste anymore resources scouring the entire mountain range for a single human. A single human that the tyrant would revel using against Optimus Prime and his naïve ramblings of heroism. The Autobot leader believed the insects deserved to live, despite their heinous crimes against the Cybertronians. He merely said that they were young and naïve and good at heart. He dared to say he would not judge them for actions of a single faction. Megatron would prove him wrong.

Jack would be his. Megatron would be the one that caused him pain, made him tremble with fear, forced him to cry for mercy. The Decepticon warlord would be the one that Jack would seek, would crave.

“Take care of it, Soundwave,” Megatron rumbled.

The communications officer nodded obediently and promptly departed the medbay, hailing his symbiotes.

Jack woke up surrounded by warmth. He instinctively pressed against the solid heat, soaking it in. It reminded him of cold nights in the desert, when he would curl up in his bed under a mountain of blankets. His eyes fluttered, but he closed them once his vision was assaulted by a harsh light. Just
five more minutes…

Suddenly the boy’s peaceful slumber was interrupted by a long, hitch-pitched sound. It took several long moments for him to recognize it as a door with rusted hinges. Too long.

Jack snapped his eyes open, remembering where he was, just as there was an ear-splitting, almost inhuman wail of terror. Behind him, there was a hum and flickering of optics as Arcee awoke from recharge. The teenager immediately untangled himself out of Arcee’s possessive arms, jumping to his feet, only to be greeted by a woman.

“Uh… hi,” he tried, but wasn’t surprised when he got no reaction.

Realizing no amount of charades or translations could explain an alien transforming robot, Jack decided it was time to take his leave. He and Arcee sped out of the village, fleeing from the yells and shouts of the villagers.

The rest of their journey was uneventful, which made Jack both relieved and nervous. He was afraid their time with the village would give the Decepticons a chance to catch up, but instead, the skies were clear of patrols. Jack wanted to assure himself that Megatron had grown bored of the hunt—had grown bored of him—and moved on to more important tasks. The boy knew it wasn’t true. Once the dictator set his sights on something, he wouldn’t let it go.

The human and Autobot spent a large portion of the day merely navigating the valleys and winding roads of the mountains, forced to go around entire gorges to continue their journey south. It wasn’t until late afternoon that Arcee paused on a hill.

The tall, lush green mountains were replaced by countless gray towers that scraped across the sky, as far as the eye could see. Thick, lingering haze hung at the base of the skyscrapers, distorting the streets below, where were filled with black specs of cars, bicycles, and crowds of people. Even from here, Jack could hear the roar of noise from it all, radiating from the city and drifting up the mountain.

The teenager dared to take a breath he did not realize he was holding. They made it. They made it to Beijing.

As Beijing was one of the largest cities in the world, it was crammed with millions of people trying to push against each other as much as possible. If the Decepticons followed him here, even they would have a significant challenge trying to locate him. Still, Jack felt conspicuous as ever as Arcee weaved through the congested traffic of its winding highways.

The military brat was grateful he was with Arcee, because he would have gotten lost in the maze-like streets at least a hundred times. Characters were written across every sign and every building on every street, and the American understood them as well as Cybertronian glyphs. However, the motorcycle stayed with the flow of traffic, taking casual turns as if she knew exactly where she was going. Jack realized she must be tapping into her navigational system to locate the embassy. It must have been convenient, to be a walking GPS. Even with Arcee’s acute sense of direction, it still took a couple hours to make to the heart of the city and locate the United States Embassy.

What gave it away was the pair of bright and proud American flags that hung above it doors. Along
with the tall, iron fence that wound around the property, and a guarded gate at the front. The pair of security officers, obviously bored from their uneventful job, perked up at his approach. Stone faces eyed him warily as he paused.

He waited a couple minutes as they confirmed his identity with the embassy. They must have been expecting him, because the military brat was granted access. But not without spending several long minutes as they patted him down and scanned Arcee with bomb detectors. The Autobot pulled her EM field in tight, but she couldn’t hide the faint levels of radiation she gave off. One of the guards noticed it on his device, glaring at Jack suspiciously.

Before the teenager could be tackled to the ground for driving up to a US government building with a radioactive motorcycle, apparently someone got impatient. The radio burst with a staticky order, and the gate opened. One of the guards, still not fully trusting their strange guest, walked beside the boy, Arcee being quiet and keeping pace until they got into the isolated, underground parking garage. Where a whole entourage greeted them.

It was mostly men in suits rather than armed guards, but Jack still winced at the welcoming party. Even though, he stepped off as the woman at the head stepped forward, dressed in a tight but modest skirt and a black blazer, with glossy black heels. With pitch-black hair and almond eyes, she was definitely Chinese, but spoke with a perfect American accent, revealing her true allegiance.

“Jack Darby?” she guessed. When the teenager confirmed his identity, she held out her hand and introduced herself as the American ambassador. “Agent Fowler told me you were coming.”

“You two friends?” Jack inquired, giving a quick shake, noticing how she said it like she knew him personally.

“Just one ambassador to another.” The Ambassador glanced at the motorcycle, still and quiet, next to him. She looked back to her guest, her eyes filled with uncertainty and an odd wonder. “Is… this one of them?”

Jack nodded.

“Can I see?”

The teen turned to his friend, murmuring in assurance, “It’s okay, Arcee.”

Awed gasps filled the air and eyes widened as the robot-in-disguise revealed her true form. Jack wasn’t surprised that even the tallest men in the room recoiled at the sight of the sudden event. Arcee, although short by Cybertronian standards, still towered over the humans, craning her neck down to peer at the short Ambassador. The woman’s eyes were bright with amazement.

“I never seen one up close before,” she gasped. “I didn’t believe it when I first heard it.”

Jack cocked an eyebrow, never seeing this type of reaction before. Fowler had said the Ambassador knew of the Autobots, but apparently that was as far as it went. The boy decided to voice was he was wondering.

“How do you know about the Autobots?” he asked curiously. It took a few seconds for the ogling Ambassador to turn her head towards him.

“I helped cover for the Shanghai incident,” she explained, though it didn’t clear anything up for Jack. Shanghai? Incident? Apparently the woman saw his puzzled look, as she elaborated, “There was a particularly aggressive—and large—Decepticon that attacked in the industry district. NEST forces were sent to intercept it, but… there was a lot of damage done.”
NEST. Jack heard that only a couple times since his time with the Autobots. The only definition he got was that it was the name of the treaty the Autobots signed with the American government.

Forces? Did she mean the Autobots? Or the U.S. military? Fowler had told the boy that the military occasionally stepped in a fight against the Decepticons, but usually left the Autobots to their own devices. Jack never heard anything about Shanghai. Before his time?

“They sent the Autobots all the way to China?” Jack concluded.

He knew the Autobots traveled all over the Earth in their battle against the Decepticons, but that was usually for their own discrete missions. He never heard of the Pentagon actively deploying the Autobots. The teen felt stupid when the Ambassador twisted her delicate features to give him a weird look.

“They had to send the military with the Autobots to bring that thing down.”

No one definitely told him that.

“Optimus really doesn’t tell you anything, does he?”

Jack let out a shaky sigh as Arcee and the Ambassador introduced each other. Several more delegates jumped when Arcee starting speaking. At first the teenager didn’t understand what the big deal was, but then he remembered that his first encounter with the Autobots was surprising. And that was putting it mildly.

With introductions over, Arcee was left in her own private corner of the garage and Jack was escorted inside. The first thing he was shown was a hot meal. At first, Jack stared at it, until the rich spices tickled his nose and his mouth salivated. He scarfed it down, swallowing bites whole. It felt like he hadn’t eaten in—

Jack froze mid-bite. When… when was the last time he ate?

He asked one of the delegates what day it was. Jack flinched when the man said it was Monday. The teen connected the dots. He had been kidnapped Saturday night. Had he really gone two whole days without anything? The last time, it had almost killed him. …Right?

The army brat’s meal didn’t last long, when the delegates started peppering him with questions. Mostly how he knew the Transformers, how he got to China, what happened to him (was it that obvious?). Jack didn’t answer them, remembering the Ambassador told he wasn’t supposed to tell his story, but it still made his defenses kick up. He hated being surrounded by prying, curious eyes. It brought up bad memories.

Jack retreated to a private room, complete with a full bathroom. He took a long, hot shower, not stepping out until it had long turned cold. He was given fresh clothes, which he was grateful for, after his favorite sweater had been torn to shreds by Megatron and dirtied from spending two days in the wilds. Wait…

Still shirtless, Jack spun around, so that his back faced the mirror. He looked over his shoulder in an awkward angle to see the damage the warlord had done to him from his kidnapping, only to see healing pink. The cuts would definitely scar, but it certainly didn’t look like he had been marred by a sadistic brute.

The teenager quickly dressed and dived into the bed, hair still wet, curling underneath the protection of the covers. Jack closed his eyes in an attempt to sleep. Maybe if he woke up, this would all be an absurd dream…
Suddenly white-hot pain flared across his face. Jack wailed. He immediately slapped a hand over his eye, either trying to find the source or cradle whatever wound that was inflicted. His skin was dry and smooth when he touched it, but it was hot. The teen seethed as the burning sensation spread across his face. The migraine behind his eye exploded. It hurt, it hurt, it hurt!

He must have been screaming, because suddenly there were hands touching him. There were soothing voices above him, but it didn’t relieve the anguish. The boy flailed helplessly, kicking off the blanket and he think he struck someone.

Then the intense agony receded. A layer of sweat covered Jack’s skin, having his clothes stick, as he panted heavily. His blurry vision cleared to see bewildered faces looking down on him. The army brat swallowed, which hurt his dry throat.

Naturally the several delegates that had been attracted by his shouting began fussing over him, a man even calling for the on-sight doctor. Jack respectfully declined. He asked for water, which seemed to confuse his hosts more. But they complied to his wish and eventually left him alone. Jack leaned on his knees, trying to will the trembling to go away. With a tired sigh, he touched the left side of his face. He froze when he realized.

It was the same area where Megatron was injured.

The bowels of Kaon surrounded him, dark and oppressive and imprisoning. He didn’t deserve to be here. He deserved to walk beside the sun. He deserved to walk among the gods.

Suddenly he saw a light. A flicker of promise in a hopeless world.

He neared it, hungrily, reaching out…

Only for the light to be stolen by Optimus Prime.

Jack snapped his eyes open with a gasp. His heart jumped to his throat when he was only greeted with darkness. The light was gone. His head swam with disorientation, the teenager jolting into a sitting position, until he recognized the silhouettes of furniture around him. The embassy. He was still as the embassy.

Jack let out a shaky sigh as he buried his face in his hands. When did he fall asleep? He couldn’t remember the last time he checked the clock. Determining the pitch-blackness of the room and the quietness of the air, it must had been late. With another groan, the teen collapsed back onto the pillow. Only that he couldn’t react.

His heart raced rapidly against his ribs. Every time he opened he eyes, he saw the darkness of the mines. Suppressive, suffocating. Instead of sixteen-years-old, Jack felt like a little kid scared of the dark. It didn’t help his senses were sharp and alert, trying to recognize every sound in his strange environment. The rattling of the grate from the air conditioning, the creaking of the bed every time he shifted, the scratching of the window.

Jack closed his eyes. Wait.

He reopened his eyes and stilled his breath. Sure enough, there was a muffled, grating noise coming from the frame, almost like… Suddenly he became aware of humid air in the room. When the AC was still on full blast. Jack dared to peered through the blackness.
Only to see blood-red optics.

The teenager screamed and instinct kicked in. His fingers curled around the closest throwable object in the room—his pillow. He hurled it with all his might at Laserbeak, the Decepticon perched on the windowsill. Not surprising, the soft object did no physical damage, but it did provoke a startled squawk.

Jack was already leaping off the bed, only to fall to the floor as the sheets twisted around his legs. With a strained grunt, he untangled himself and covered the distance to the door in a single bound. He threw it open and already moving into the hallway, ramming into a hard, solid object. That struck his ribs with crushing force.

The army brat wailed in pain as the pressure squeezed against his lungs and he was thrown back into the room. Thankfully the bed broke his fall, but he landed on its side, his back bending awkwardly at the impact. He slumped to the floor in a tangle of limbs, moaning. A sadistic laugh came from the doorway.

Not Megatron. It was much higher-pitched. Almost nasally, if that was possible for a mechanical being.

“Crumble before Rumble!” the Decepticon laughed, hysterical from his successful sneak attack.

The Decepticon the same size as him, with sharp-edged, purplish-blue armor. His optics were a blazing red and his servos ended in claws. There was a squawk from Laserbeak, angry.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” the Decepticon dismissed. “I’ll bring him to the Boss in one piece.”

The flyer growled, as if in annoyance, and with a flap of wings, the cassette disappeared into the night. Leaving Jack alone with another vicious Decepticon. What did he say? Crumble? Rumble? Was that his name?

Before the poor boy could move to his feet or even finish his thought, a cold hand snatched the scuff of his neck. He wheezed as he was forced to his feet.

“Let’s go, fleshy,” the Decepticon, Rumble, ordered, already half-carrying, half-dragging his prisoner through the door.

“L-Let me go!” Jack protested, kicking his legs and wrapping his fingers around the servo holding him in a vice grip.

“Nuh-uh.”

“Hel—”

The boy’s plea ended in a yelp as Rumble disciplined him with a whack to the head.

“Shuddup! Boss said I had to be quiet!” the Decepticon scolded. “So you be quiet!”

The harsh order just made Jack want to protest in defiance, despite the crushing grip on his spine and now the pulsing headache in his skull. Boss? Who was that? He first thought of Megatron. But the warlord was anything but quiet—he would have sent the whole Decepticon armada to attack. He wouldn’t have sent Laserbeak, a watchful presence. A block of ice settled in the boy’s stomach when he realized. Soundwave.

The teen struggled harder, which only rewarded him with Rumble’s claws digging into his soft skin.
Where was everyone? Guards? Delegates? Arcee? Rumble wasn’t disguised. Someone had to see him, right?

“You won’t get away with this!” Jack tried.

“Oh, that’s a new one,” Rumble retorted. “So, how about you be a good little human and—”

The Decepticon stopped mid-sentence and mid-stride as suddenly voices came from down the hallway. Before the interloper could flee, a pair of armed guards rounded the corner in front of them. From his awkward angle on the ground, Jack glanced up to see both men recoiling at the metal being with shouts of shock and panic. Until they noticed the American hostage in the interloper’s grip.

“Well, this is awkward,” grumbled Rumble.

Both men unholstered their guns and held them out in a blink of an eye. At the same time, the Decepticon pulled Jack from all fours to his feet, holding out his prisoner in front of him. The teenager growled in protest, realizing once again he was being used as a meat shield.

“You can’t shoot me! You can’t shoot me!” Rumble sang with glee. How this chatterbox was a symbiote of the silent Soundwave, Jack would never know.

Suddenly there was a stampede of polished shoes on tile, followed by several furious shouts. Jack awkwardly looked over the cassette’s shoulder to see a squadron of guards had filled the hallway behind them. Weapons are ready.

“What the fuck is that thing?”

“Ó, wǒ de shàngdì!”

“Shoot it!”

“Wait, it has a hostage!”

The warning came too late, as several guards opened fire on the Decepticon’s back.

“Ow, ow, ow, OW!” Rumble whined, which turned into a pained yelp as a lead bullet impeded into the wires between a gap of armor.

Most of the volley bounced off harmlessly, or ricocheted into Jack’s leg, provoking a much louder scream. The infiltrator acted quickly, transforming his servo into a blunt, cylinder shape. With a whirr, it spread out into quadruple-edged piledriver.

Without warning, Rumble slammed it into the floor, then again and again. Jack almost lost his footing and several of the guard wobbled as the entire hallway shook from the shockwave of the hefty attack. Then the teenager heard a familiar sound, which increased in volume and frequency as the Decepticon continued his rapid strikes. The prisoner glanced down, only to blanch at the dark, jagged cracks growing at his feet.

Then the floor gave way.

Jack screamed as gravity grabbed him in a vice grip, his stomach flying to his throat. He fell with a shower of dust and chunks of concrete and steel. He wheezed at the jar of impact, metal arms breaking his fall. Before the boy could scramble away, he was thrown over Rumble’s shoulder like a stack of potatoes.
No longer caring about stealth, the Decepticon dashed in an inhuman speed, using his piledrivers to slap away humans in his path and shatter pesky walls into dust. By the time his captor skidded to a sudden halt, Jack wanted to heave from the jarring and disorienting ride. There was a pause as Rumble glanced back and forth.

"Uh, I had a getaway mechanimal," the cassette said aloud.

He squawked as suddenly something crashed onto the ground in front of him, sending asphalt into the air. There was a horrible sound of metal scrapping across stone until it came to a sudden halt as the owner righted itself.

Jack stared at the four-legged Cybertronian, which had to be almost the size of a horse. Its silvery and ebony hide ended in wicked-sharp edges and fully-erected spikes went down from its helm to its whip-like tail. It head was made of a long snout, gnashing fangs, and narrowed, fierce optics. Its long tail ended in a trio of knife-like blades.

Suddenly there was another thud, cracking asphalt. Arcee.

The Autobot was covered in claw and bite marks, telling she had been in combat with the beast for quite a while. Her blades were unsheathed and held out before her as she glared at her opponent, only to start when she noticed Rumble emerging from the embassy’s front door. Jack in hand.

"Jack!" the guardian cried, lunging forward.

"Ravage!" Rumble wailed, flinching back in fright.

Just before Arcee was upon them, a large silver streak, Ravage, slammed into the Autobot. The pair rolled away in a ball of metal and claws, their high-pitched and monstrous screeches filling the night air.

"You had one job, Ravage!" Rumble complained.

Jack once again glanced up at a poor angle at the sound of rushing footsteps and rattling weapons. The Decepticon groaned and turned around to see every guard in the embassy had come. And every weapon in the building was trained on him. Even the nearly-invincible cassette seemed nervous.

"Erm… How about we talk this out?" Rumble tried. The Ambassador glared.

"Get this piece of trash out of my house," she ordered.

Suddenly there was a single gunshot, and the Decepticon yelled as his knee crumbled underneath him. Jack wheezed as he rolled off his captor’s shoulder as Rumble lost his grip. The teenager used the new leverage to shove away from the cassette, which rewarded him with claws digging into his skin. He sent his heel into Rumble’s optic, provoking a pained shout, freeing himself and dashing towards the safety of his fellow humans.

"Argh!" the cassette yelled in frustration. "Fine, get ready for one serious tumble with Rumble!"

How was he related to Soundwave again?

Jack never got his answer as suddenly Rumble transformed his arms into dual piledrivers. He raised them high and brought them down towards the ground—only for the bulk of Ravage to slam into him. Both Decepticons whined as they skidded across the ground in a tangle of limbs. Arcee landed in front of the humans like a shield, ready to confront the interlopers once again.
Rumble and Ravage climbed to their pedes, just as Laserbeak glided over them. The flyer squawked angrily, probably chiding his arrogant brothers. However, all three Decepticons froze at the sight of the army against them, fresh for a fight while they were effectively covered in dents and dirt. Rumble pouted.

“Jerks! We didn’t want him that bad, anyway!” the cassette called as he scrambled onto Ravage’s back, albeit clumsily. “Lord Megatron’s gonna crush every one of you stupid insects!”

“Tell Megatron to get fragged!” Jack boldly spat at the retreating trio of symbiotes.

Ravage effortlessly vaulted over the concrete wall that guarded the embassy and disappeared from view. Laserbeak flew into the night, his black wings blending into the darkness. Naturally half of the security moved forward to pursue the drones, but were halted by the Ambassador.

“It’s not our job to hunt them,” she pointed out. “Attend to our wounded and I want a perimeter set up around the campus.” There were several affirmatives and the force scrambled to follow her orders. Allowing the American representative to fix her glare on Jack. “You, back inside. Get yourself to a doctor. You’re under protective custody until Fowler gets here. Then you’re his problem.”

She spoke with a mixture of concern and impatience, like she didn’t want to deal with Jack but she knew she had to. The boy realized it wasn’t untrue—her duty was to represent her country in a foreign land. She was merely thrust upon the situation, and realized it was far over her head. Still, Jack couldn’t help the bubble of rage that filled his chest.

“I was under protective custody!” the boy shouted. “That’s not going to stop them! Megatron’s just going to keep coming after me until—”

“Jack,” a soft voice interrupted, a servo gently squeezing his shoulder. Jack turned to meet the blue gaze of Arcee. “We won’t let Megatron hurt you again. We’ll protect you, I promise.”

“Just like you protected me before?” the teenager snapped with venom.

Arcee flinched, violently, as her optics and mouth went wide with hurt shock. Even the Ambassador blinked. Jack felt a squeeze of guilt, but the anger outweighed it.

Once the obsessive warlord got his sights on something, Megatron would stop at nothing to make it his. He destroyed his own planet to claim the Matrix of Leadership. He conquered entire solar systems in his war against Optimus Prime. He planned to rip the Earth apart in order to destroy the human race. And now, the Decepticon leader had his claws buried in Jack’s flesh. Megatron would never let him go.

The tyrant would destroy anything that stood in his way. Jack should have known that coming here was a mistake, that the Decepticons would only follow him. He should have known Arcee couldn’t protect him.
“You look like death warmed up,” was the first thing Fowler stated when the government agent arrived the next day.

“What does that even mean,” Jack mumbled, sleep-deprived, sore, and starving.

“It means you look like shit.”

The teenager believed it. After the symbiotes’ failed kidnapping, he had been immediately sent to the medical wing. The doctor treated several scratches across his body, which were a combination of Rumble’s rough handling and the ricocheting bullets that had caught him. Thankfully, they were only flesh wounds. When the patient complained his chest was hurting, the doctor glanced at the piledriver-size bruise on his side. He determined none of the ribs were broken, but certainly bruised, so Jack would be sore for awhile.

The army brat didn’t get any sleep for the rest of the night, too edgy from the night’s excitement. He expected the symbiotes to return or Soundwave or even Megatron to come crumbling the embassy to the ground. It never happened, but Jack couldn’t relax with the army of security and Arcee patrolling the grounds with hawk-like eyes.

Finally Jack’s hosts tried to coax him to eat, even though he didn’t want to. It ended up being a mistake, when after breakfast, the boy learned a guard had been killed in the assault. Nausea snatched him in a vice grip and he emptied whatever was in his stomach.

Yeah, Jack felt like shit.

Then again, Fowler didn’t look much better. The man looked like he had aged in the three days since Jack saw him. There were dark bags under his eyes, his face sagged into a frown, and white streaks appeared in his coarse hair. When asked, the agent confessed he had been flying all over the United States to clean up after the attack on the Autobot base. Fowler assured the Autobots were well and they had been relocated to a NEST facility.

Fowler and the Ambassador exchanged professional pleasantries, and the agent took Jack off the woman’s hands. The representative watched the boy with a look of concern and pity, but he knew she was relieved an alien war was no longer at her doorstep. Jack hated that look—it was the same one everyone used to give him after his father’s funeral.

A short drive later, Jack found himself on a Boeing-4 headed back to American soil. Only he was surprised when he learned the flight was headed towards the Indian Ocean instead of the Pacific. When he pointed it out, Fowler merely chuckled and told him to get comfortable.

It was hard to, with his back pressed against the hard canvas seats. And the fact that the gigantic
plane hit every single stretch turbulence. It made Jack moan in pain and nausea. He could see why Arcee had to be strapped in place. The free-spirited Autobot was less than thrilled when she was instructed to stay in her alternative mode for the entire trip, with flat, nylon straps tying her into place. They were just tight enough to keep her still, and could be easily removed by the Transformer. However, after the first bout of violent shutters of the aircraft, Arcee wisely decided to stay put, even though she was still grumbling.

The only one that wasn’t miserable was Fowler. The exhausted man knocked out cold as soon as they were up in the air. Having his heavy, drawn-out snores fill the entire cabin. Jack cringed in agitation, initially trying to wait it out. When his patience quickly dissolved, he shouted in attempt to wake Fowler up. The man didn’t even pause his deafening sounds, and Jack didn’t trust himself to close the distance between them. So, he went to throwing several light objects at the man, only for each once to bounce harmlessly off Fowler’s belly. Every time the agent sputtered, Jack hoped it meant he was waking up, only for the man to resume the cycles of snores.

Jack was never more relieved—or utterly exhausted—in his life when the plane began its descent. He glanced out the porthole curiously to see crystal-blue ocean stretching in all directions, glittering underneath the sunlight like it was impeded with diamonds. In the center of the water, breaking the blue plane for miles, was a single strip of land. It curled around in the water like a giant slithering snake of green and white, forming a makeshift U-shape in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

Jack squinted his eyes to peer at the series of buildings that crowded on one side of the island, most of them surrounding several strips of runways. It was full of planes and vehicles in all shapes and sizes, the black specs of soldiers crossing the pale asphalt like rows of ants. A military base. A NEST base. Diego Garcia.

It was Lieutenant Colonel Lennox that greeted them as the Beoing-4 paused at the end of the runway. Instead of the sharp service uniform Jack had last seen him in, the man wore green-camouflage fatigues and rough combat boots.

“Have a good flight?” he asked the pair they stepped off.

“Slept the whole way,” Fowler answered happily.

“Didn’t sleep a wink,” Jack muttered grumpily.

Lennox merely chuckled at their opposing responses and escorted them deeper into the base. He explained that Diego Garcia was a joint military base for the United Kingdom and the United States, and served as one of their main bases in the Indian Ocean. Its isolation, and the fact it was only occupied by military personnel, made it a perfect fit for the Autobots. Jack was about to protest he didn’t see any sign of the extra-terrestrials, until a pair of high-pitched engines came from the runway.

He glanced over his shoulder to see a pair of Corvette Stingray sports cars race down its length at an dizzying speed. Jack’s brain only translated a streak of silver and yellow.

“Sideswipe and Sunstreaker,” Lennox introduced when he noticed Jack’s staring. “The twins like to race each other when the runway’s clear.”

Oh, yeah, the other Autobots. That everyone seemed to forgot to mention.
“How many other Autobots are there?” Jack asked.

Apparently there were over a dozen functioning Autobots on Earth, instead of just the five Jack had spent an entire year with. They were split into three teams. Team Prime, which was the one the teenager knew, which was formerly stationed in Autobot Outpost Omega One. It was Optimus and his team’s duty to deal with isolated incidents. Such as keeping the Decepticons from civilian cities, and confronting them whenever there was too much of a problem.

The second team was lead by Ironhide, Optimus Prime’s weapons specialist, that worked directly with U.S. military forces. The special operations group actively hunted Decepticons, expelling any one of them that tried to hide out in a city. That was what happened in Shanghai.

Last but not least, was the research team. Unlike the other two, the research team was banned from combat. Instead, the Autobots to keep a low profile, hiding from the ever searching eyes of the Decepticons. They had a base of their own, working with American scientists. Jack pointed out that he thought the Autobots weren’t allowed to trade their technology.

“Weaponry,” Lennox corrected. “Doesn’t mean we can’t research science together. Such as how the Autobots can better arm themselves against the Decepticons.”

“Where are they?”

“Can’t tell you.” When the teenager cocked an eyebrow, the lieutenant elaborated, “It’s a security precaution. None of the teams know where the other two are located. Only Prime knows where all the Autobots are, and only General Bryce can tell you where all military personnel under NEST are.”

By the time Lennox finished his lecture, the group had made it to the main hanger. Jack looked around in awe. It was a lot like the military silo, but at the same time, completely different.

The hanger was large enough for most Cybertronians to walk around in comfortably. Catwalks crossed over the expansive space, hanging below bright, fluorescent lights. Large screens of computers were tucked in corners that made up stations, like the console in the former base. That was where the similarities ended.

Unlike the empty military silo, the hanger was filled with people. Technicians, engineers, and military personnel walked back and forth across the large space, each one with a task and a destination in their mind and thought of nothing else. Jack watched as soldiers dressed in black combat gear fall from the rafters, attached to lines, and landed in a perfect crouch, weapons already up to shoot an imaginary Decepticon. Technicians crowded around human-sized computers, deep in conversation about something on the screen.

“The Autobots are held in a separate hanger,” Lennox explained, when he noticed the teenager was scanning for certain tall figures. The man fixed him with a stare. “Your friends are there.”

Jack couldn’t help but frown. Miko and Raf. His friends.

“Even though they betrayed you?”

He knew it was a risk to involve them in his deal with Megatron. But he had feared for them, that they would suffer the consequences. Not once did he fear for himself. Maybe Megatron was going to kidnap the him anyway. Maybe he was going to destroy the base, despite the fact Jack succeeded. Maybe the whole reason why Jack had been a victim once again was because his best friends broke their promise.
Now you know what it’s like to be betrayed.”

No, Jack didn’t want to see them. He pointedly turned away, only to notice a large figure he hadn’t seen before. The Autobot emblem was branded on pristine white armor. Sky-blue patches of paint plastered across flawless metal. The Cybertronian was a similar size to Bumblebee, even having the same broad, fluttering doorwings. And like Bumblebee, the Autobot was restless as humans scurried around him, running diagnostics. They picked at his armor, prodding his inner wiring, tearing him apart—

Jack’s vision was cloaked in a bright hue. He gritted his teeth as suddenly an explosive of pain came from inside his skull. He instinctively shut his eyes and gripped his head, trying to will the agony to go away. There was a shout of noise, but it was muffled and muted. Jack glanced up, only to see the tall, dark form of Megatron pinned by the cold grasp of humanity. As they helped themselves to his secrets they did not deserve to have…

“Jack, are you alright?” Arcee’s voice cut through his reality like a knife.

Suddenly the pain receded and Megatron’s bulk was replaced by the small Autobot. Jack swallowed. “Y-yeah, just a headache, that’s all,” the teenager dismissed, but did not look at his guardian, whose servo was protectively on his shoulder. He didn’t trust himself he could hide the intrusive thoughts from his partner. Nor Fowler, who stared him with squinted eyes.

“I think it’s a good idea for you to get some sleep,” the agent suggested.

Jack didn’t want sleep. He wanted to leave. Instead of voicing his desire, he said, “I’m fine, really. Who’s this?” He gestured to the Autobot, who glanced down curiously at them.

“Jack, this is Smokescreen, our newest recruit,” Lennox introduced. “He was an Elite Guard on Cybertron. Now he’s working with NEST.”

“How are you doing?” said Smokescreen in a warm, friendly voice, as he if was greeting a comrade.

Jack opened his mouth to reply, but never had the chance. Suddenly a sharp, authoritative tone drifted over the clamor of the hanger.

“I would like to speak to whoever’s in charge here!”

Jack’s companions’ reactions were immediate. Lennox’s eyes rolled into his head. Fowler frowned and defensively crossed his arms over his chest. Then there was a strange, high-pitched growl. The boy glanced over at Arcee to see she was crouching on all fours, armor plating bristling, wings up, and optics dilated.

“What is he doing here?” Arcee demanded in a low, deadly snarl.

The human followed his guardian’s gaze to a newcomer storming into the hanger. They were a tall, lanky figure dressed in a flashy suit with polished Gucci shoes, so flawless that even Knock Out would be impressed. He looked Italian, with olive skin, dark eyes, and a sharp nose. His black, curly hair had streaks of silver.

“Have Smokescreen and Arcee go with the rest of the Autobots,” Lennox ordered Fowler through a quiet mutter. “And take Jack to one of the spare suites.”

Fowler muttered an affirmative and relayed his order to Arcee, the other Autobot already transforming into a LeMans racing car and wheeling away. At the sound, the stranger’s head
snapped in their direction, eyes locking onto Arcee. The two-wheeler growled. With one last glance
with Jack, the Autobot reluctantly transformed and followed Smokescreen out of the hanger.
Meanwhile, Fowler was ushering Jack away.

“I told Lennox not to bring him here,” the agent was muttering.

“What’s going on?” the confused teenager asked. “Who is that?”

The liaison sighed, as if in attempt to calm himself, before he answered, “Seymour Simmons. He
used to be an agent for Sector Seven.”

“Well, well, they made you top dog, huh?” Simmons drawled as the man came to a pause in front of
Lennox.

“Lieutenant colonel,” the military officer corrected, folding his hands behind his back.

He kept his voice calm and measured, not giving Simmons the satisfaction of hearing his anger or
annoyance. Instead he put over his professional mask of a soldier, willing patience. Lennox did invite
him here. Not without Optimus Prime’s permission, of course, and careful consideration. After being
told that the Decepticons had a list of Sector Seven surviving members, Lennox had to hastily order
his retrieval, under the guise he was being put under protective custody.

Which wasn’t untrue, but Lennox not only had to protect the former government agent from the
Decepticons, but almost a dozen angry Autobots. Although Prime agreed to Lennox’s request, the
other extra-terrestrials were not as pleased to hear a human that had tormented their kind would be
among them. Even if that victim was Megatron.

Although Simmons claimed to be looking for him, the man’s eyes were flicking back and forth,
trying to scan and memorize every detail of the hanger. Like a hawk searching for prey. It was his
job under Sector Seven, after all. Lennox used his broader build to obstruct the former agent’s view.
He hoped at least Simmons would be distracted by the Autobots’ presence. Instead, a block of dread
settled in Lennox’s stomach when Simmons’s curious gaze settled on Jack Darby’s retreating back.

“It that the kid?” the former Sector Seven agent demanded.

“What kid?” Lennox played dumb.

“Don’t think I was briefed on what’s going on here—”

“Briefed?”

“Overheard, whatever,” Simmons corrected, shrugging and waving his hands in exasperation.
“Apparently your alien friends have some ‘unauthorized’ contact with some high school kids. And a
little birdie told me that one of them had contact with NBE-1.”

“Megatron,” Lennox retorted in a mutter, already picturing chewing out whoever had spoken
sensitive information around the Sector Seven agent. The other man ignored him.

“Do you know how many people have had contact with NBE-1? Actual, face-to-face, contact?”
Before Lennox could correct him once again or reply, Simmons answered his own question.
“Nada.” In a blink of an eye, his excitable rant dropped to a serious, unwavering tone. “I want to talk
to him.”
“Absolutely not.”

The lieutenant colonel shook his head sternly and defensively crossed his arms. A one-on-one conversation with Simmons in a locked room would just traumatize Jack, if he wasn’t already. Which Lennox highly doubted. He didn’t fail to notice how the boy was slumped with exhaustion, his eyes glazed, when he stepped off the plane, quiet and reserved. The soldier had seen plenty of shell-shocked troops to recognize the teenager’s distress. No, Lennox wouldn’t make the poor boy relive that.

“He needs to be debriefed, anyway, am I right?” Simmons demanded, already poking at protocols he shouldn’t know, but somehow did. Just like he knew about Jack, when he shouldn’t.

“The kid’s been through enough,” Lennox argued. Before the former agent could protest, he went on with a harsh, authoritative order, “You stay away from him; you stay away from the Autobots. You are not to have access to their hanger and you are to stay at least fifty feet from them.”

Simmons looked like Lennox had slapped him, even reeling back in shock. “What? They put a restraining order on me or something?”

“No, I did. According to the Alien/Autobot Cooperation Act, civilians are not to have any contact with the Autobots.”

At the colonel’s pointed look, Simmons sputtered, “It was because of you Sector Seven disbanded. You put me out of work. I’m not even allowed to hold a government position again, not even a janitor at a post office, did you know that?”

If Lennox was supposed to feel pity for the man, he didn’t. Despite over three years unemployed, it was apparent Simmons knew how to scour for information and twist it to his advantage. And he was still used to getting his way. Sector Seven always got its way.

“You’re not talking to Jack, or the Autobots,” Lennox said in an iron voice, his word final. Simmons rolled his eyes, his whole head following the motion, before he raised his hands from his sides.

“Your boys storm into my house, wake me up in the dead of night, drag me onto a fifteen hour flight, and now you tell me I’m not allowed to do anything.” His palms slapped his sides. “What am I even doing here?”

“Protective custody.” It was the truth.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but you don’t seem very sympathetic,” Simmons accused.

Lennox wasn’t surprised the former intelligence agent caught on so quickly. He knew it was more than just an alien witness protection program. It was then the lieutenant colonel eyed the workers buzzing around the pair. Each and every one of them seemed engrossed in their own task, not a soul noticing the quarreling men in the center of the hanger. But Lennox was still all too aware that there were too many eyes and ears that could all too easy see and hear the men. The seemingly busy technicians could be watching them instead.

With a wave of a hand, Lennox ushered Simmons away from the hustle of the base, towards a secluded hallway. For his credit, Simmons didn’t protest or question the change of scenery, but eyed the blank walls curiously, following his guide closely.

“We have reason to believe the Decepticons are targeting Sector Seven agents,” Lennox explained, but was careful to keep out where they retrieved that information.
“Oh, so the aliens are assassinating humans now, huh?” Simmons commented. “The beginning of the invasion?”

Lennox didn’t comment that Earth was arguably already being invaded, and it was NEST’s duty to keep the other side from winning. A secret, but deadly war, that no one could know about. Still, the man couldn’t help but be annoyed at the agent’s nonchalance at the whole affair.

“If it was up to me, you would be in prison right now,” Lennox growled.

When Congress disbanded Sector Seven, it also approved of a full-scale investigation of the agency. Finding them guilty of a very, very long list of crimes—privacy violations, fraud, theft from petty to grand to federal, and even interfering with other federal investigations. And that was just tip of the iceberg. Anything to keep their advantage over other government agencies, and keep anyone else from knowing their hoard of secrets. Simmons was one of their high-ranking field agents, that didn’t participate in the experiments with Cybertronian technology, but was tasked with looking for it, by any means necessary.

He had been tried, with many other Sector Seven agents, but one of the few found not guilty. Even though he was spared from years in federal prison, Simmons was banned from ever having a high-ranking position again. Lennox didn’t how the man spent his days after spending his entire adult career researching Cybertronians. From what the military officer could gather, the former agent was bored, and still as every bit obsessed with Transformers. Likely why Simmons was eager to be at Diego Garcia rather than bitter.

“If it was up to you, huh?” Simmons echoed with a cocked eyebrow, like it was Lennox acting like the smug one.

The lieutenant colonel ignored him as he unlocked the door to his private office. He stepped aside to grant his guest entrance and promptly closed the door behind them.

“The only reason you are here,” Lennox continued, “is because I need of your…” The man thought of every word in the dictionary, and still couldn’t find the right one. “…expertise.”

“You need my help,” Simmons translated.

The taste in Lennox’s mouth was too bitter for the man to confirm or deny the agent’s conclusion. Instead, he rounded his plain, metal desk to pull out a drawer. Meanwhile, Simmons made himself comfortable, sitting on one of the modest chairs across from it, watching Lennox’s actions intently.

The lieutenant colonel pulled out a file, ignoring the large, bold letters glaring at him, and he opened it up. He took out a picture and slid across the desk to Simmons.

“You know who this is?” Lennox asked as the other man plucked it up with delicate fingers.

The commander already knew the answer. Taken from a security camera, the zoomed in image was blurry and bright, but the figure at the center was distinguishable all the same. Broad-shouldered, stern features, cropped white hair. The distinct scars were a giveaway. He wasn’t surprised when it only took Simmons a few moments of squinting to answer.

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“You know who this is?” the former agent identified, tossing the flimsy piece of paper back.

“Former colonel,” Lennox corrected. “Now goes under the alias ‘Silas,’ the leader of MECH, a radical terrorist group.”

“What do they want?”
Simmons’s excitable and demanding demeanor was gone. He was still an agent of the United States government, trained to be calm and collected and rational. His tone had completely turned into a leveled, professional one. It almost surprised Lennox, how quickly the man sobered in such a short time. Almost.

“The usual shit,” the military officer replied bitterly as he took his own chair. “Anarchy, blow stuff up, shoot first, ask questions later.” Lennox tucked the file back into the drawer, locking it. “A couple weeks ago, a U.S. team busted one of their arms deals.” At Simmons’s questioning stare he added, “Selling Cybertronian technology.” Raised eyebrows were the only thing that betrayed the former agent’s surprise. “They’ve been converting it to human weaponry, reverse engineering like —”

“Sector Seven,” finished Simmons. Lennox paused, and nodded. The guest leaned forward a bit in his chair. “So let me guess, you need me to know how they do it.”

“I need someone that knows both human and Cybertronian technology and how they interact.”

Simmons was nodding, showing he understood. “And that’s all?”

“No.” Lennox leaned forward and dropped his voice. Even in the security of his office, he still didn’t trust his surroundings. Even if he knew there were no bugs. He had checked. “After a fight between the Autobots and the Decepticons, sometimes they leave scraps behind. It’s NEST’s responsibility to clean up it before it falls into Decepticon or civilian hands, but lately… someone’s been beating us to it...”

Simmons realized instantly. “You have a leak.”

Lennox fixed the government spook with a hard stare. “I need to find the mole, and I need to find MECH. Before the treaty is compromised, or worse, innocent people are killed.”

“And you can’t trust anyone in your organization because you don’t who it is. Except for the new guy. Can’t spy one someone if you’re not even around.”

The lieutenant colonel didn’t like taking these measures. He had been trained to confront the enemy. He had always been told the enemy was on the outside of the base—snipers, extremists, vicious aliens. Never did he expect to fight an enemy within. Lennox had made a vow as an Army Ranger to protect and serve his country, to give his life for his family and his flag. He would give his life for his comrades, and it shook him to his core there was a brother that did not share the same sentiment.

Unlike Simmons. Unlike the ex-Ranger, he had been trained from within the shadows. He knew how to remain unseen even as he observed anything and everything he thought as relevant to himself or a threat to national security. His enemies did not realize he was there until it was too late, if at all. Simmons was the perfect spy, even if he was one of the government spooks that Lennox detested.

“So we have a deal?” the lieutenant colonel inquired. “You help me serve our country, and I put you in protective custody.”

“And full access to the base,” Simmons demanded. “Including wherever you’re keeping the aliens and you let me talk to bad-things-happen-to-alien-magnet kid.”

Lennox clenched his jaw. The Autobots weren’t happy that Simmons was even here. Not only was granting Simmons contact with them technically a violation of the treaty (at least, that was the excuse he was holding onto), it would be an insult to his allies. And he definitely didn’t want Darby being debriefed by Simmons of all people.
But he realized he didn’t have much of a choice. He would never admit it, but he needed Simmons. He needed someone to trust, even if he didn’t at the same time. Lennox sighed. He just hoped the Autobots, and Jack, would forgive him.

“Fine,” he grounded out, adding before the smug look appeared on Simmons’s face, “but after we find the mole.”

The corner of the spy’s lips twitched upwards in a ghost of a smile. “When do we start?”

Chapter End Notes

So I took some liberties for some worldbuilding, and I bring Smokescreen and Simmons into the fray! He was actually hard to write, especially being skewed from Lennox’s perspective, so I hope I gave him justice. I was trying to explore the tension between him and Lennox. This is mostly because they have opposite views how to serve their country, and how to treat the Autobots.

As for the Autobots and Jack, they hate Sector Seven in general. To them, demeaning and desecrating a Cybertronian, whether Autobot or Decepticon, even someone as depictable as Megatron, is unforgivable. So poor Simmons is going to be a punching bag in a while, but he’s in the story for a purpose. ;)

Chapter End Notes
Cold Shoulder

Jack sunk into the bed with an exhausted groan. The mattress was harder than he was used to, and the cotton of the sheets was rough, but after the hell he had been dragged through, it felt like heaven. At least he was given a private room, instead of being tossed into the barracks with a dozen soldiers. Instinctively his eyes began to droop and he curled under the blankets. At last, he could _sleep_.

But he was even denied that luxury, when a pair of familiar voices began filtering through the door.

“Jack, I’m so _sorry_!” Raf’s muffled voice came, high-pitched in a pitiful whine.

Jack stared at the wall.

“Come on, Jackrabbit!” Miko called, like the use of the nickname would encourage him. “Open up!”

He made no reply as they continued to rant, Raf’s whines becoming higher and higher and more and more muffled. Miko was just angry, her voice getting louder and louder.

“You can’t stay in there forever!” she declared.

“Go away!” Jack shouted back.

“Jack, _please_,” Raf begged.

“I don’t want to talk to you.”

There was a noise that almost sounded like a strangled sob, but was drowned out by Miko’s yell. “You’re being immature!”

“You’re one to talk!” Jack retorted.

“Come on, Jack, we’re the three musketeers! We stick together!”

The army brat rolled his eyes at her analogy. “You should have thought of that before you let me get kidnapped by Megatron.”

“We were trying to look out for you! You know, what _friends_ do.”

“Just leave me alone!” the boy demanded, shutting his eyes. He was desperate enough to fold the pillow over his ears, muffling their shouts even more.

“I’m gonna break the door down!” A pause. “I’m gonna do it!” Another pause. “I’m _really_ gonna do it!” There was silence for a solid five seconds, and Jack scoffed at Miko’s bluff. Until there was a terrible thud and the door shuttered violently, but didn’t give. There was a low, long whine on the other side, along with soft thuds of a heel bouncing on the floor. “Fine! Be a selfish jerk!”

Wasn’t he allowed to be selfish, just for _once_? Could he just stop thinking about others, and think about _himself_? Why couldn’t he?

Finally there was a mutter from the door, followed by the sound of small, retreating footsteps. Leaving Jack alone. The boy tried to use the newfound to peace to go back to sleep, only for it to allude him tauntingly. His thoughts drifted aimlessly, restlessly, and he found himself tossing and turning, fighting the sheets tangling around him. His stomach churned anxiously and his heart fluttered. Jack grumbled at his misery, and it didn’t help when there was a knock at his door.
“Go away, Miko,” the teenager ordered.

“Jack, it’s Lennox,” the lieutenant colonel’s voice replied. “May I come in?”

The boy let out a grumpy sigh. He remained cemented to the bed, reluctant to leave its warm embrace. But realizing he wasn’t getting any sleep, or peace for that matter, Jack tossed the blanket off of him and trudged to the door. He unlocked it and pulled the handle, revealing a patient Lennox on the other side.

“Thank you,” the man hummed and tentatively took a step in the room, like he was walking in Jack’s personal home, not a borrowed suite. The teenager felt the commander’s gaze scan up and down his figure, analyzing his disheveled, run-down appearance. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay,” Jack said plainly.

“Can you try something to eat?”

The teenager merely shrugged, his stomach too twisted to have any sort of appetite, but realized in had been hours since his last meal. Lennox apparently took it as a yes, and escorted his guest out of the room. Jack was realized he would have been horribly lost without the lieutenant colonel as his guide. They traveled through a maze of identical hallways and jumped to two different buildings before they finally arrived at the cafeteria.

The food quality was nothing more than average. If anything, it reminded Jack of his meals at school. He picked a small portion and joined Lennox at a table in the corner. Jack half-expected for Lennox to start interrogating him, or even scolding him, but instead the man stayed to short, idle chitchat.

It was weird being alone with such a high-ranking officer, surrounded by dozens of men in fatigues and canvas uniforms, talking about normal subjects. After everything that had happened. Jack felt his defensive walls slowly falling one by one, almost like himself again.

The teenager didn’t even realize he had cleaned his plate until Lennox stood up, guiding him back out of the cafeteria. Naturally the high school student got a few curious glances, being the youngest person in the vicinity and the only one in jeans. However, he was generally ignored for the most part, the soldiers and technicians too preoccupied with their own tasks. Squadrons jogged by in synchronized strides, roaring Humvees rode back and forth, soldiers lingered in groups, and there were yells and laughs of prank (not done on a high-ranking officer, of course).

It was eerie, to see a secret military base in the middle of the ocean was exactly like the bases Jack used to call home. He was brought back to his days in JROTC, which he took in middle school, running drills and uniform inspections. Lennox’s voice brought him out of his nostalgia.

“Come on, I think there’s someone you need to talk to,” the lieutenant colonel told.

The teen squinted at him, but said nothing as Lennox lead him another hanger, almost as the main one. Stepping inside, he quickly realized why. While the main hanger was filled with people, this hanger was filled with Autobots.

Giant, bright colors assaulted Jack’s vision; heavy, metallic thuds and high-pitched whirrs filled his hearing; the sharp smell of sanitation tickled his nostrils. The little human blinked at the ten titans that crowded the space, appearing like a moving skyscrapers of a city shoved into a warehouse.

Team Prime was there, including Arcee, who was conversing with a bright red Transformer—who Lennox introduced as Mirage. There were a pair of strange Cybertronians, the bright, sunshine yellow one flat on his pedes and the other, a sterling silver, restlessly rolled on his wheels. Other than
that, they looked exactly like—right to the shape of their helms. The twins, Sunstreaker and Sideswipe, he realized. In the far back was Smokescreen, Bumblebee, and Bulkhead, lobbing a ball of melted scrap between each other. Against one of the wall was a giant console, not unlike one at the base in Jasper. Crowding around it was Optimus Prime, Ratchet, and a solid black Autobot who Jack assumed was Ironhide. They had their attention on the screen, which was filled the face of a red-armored Autobot with splashes of white and silver.

“Dual-redundant vortex loops?” the stranger was squawking over the speakers. “All that would result in twice the energon consumption, enough to make two bridges—at the same time! Do you have any idea what kind of stress that could inflict on the space-time continuum? It’s very delicate! Very!”

“If you are so talented in groundbridge manufacturing, Perceptor,” Ratchet retorted in a impatient growl. “How about you come and aid us in ‘properly’ finishing it?”

“I would, but I don’t want to. Besides, there’s only so much even I can do with such primitive technology.”

“Hey!” Fowler snapped, who was watching the exchange from a raised platform.

“No offense, of course.”

The agent grumbled something under his breath. Lennox was nearing the group confidently, while Jack was lingering behind, slowly and hesitantly. He kept the tall and broad soldier between him and Optimus Prime. He wasn’t expecting to be taken to the Autobots. He wasn’t sure he was welcomed. It was Ironhide who noticed their approach.

“This your runt, Optimus?” the weapon specialist rumbled.

Jack immediately bristled at the comment. He wanted to inform the blunt ‘Bot that he was one of the taller ones of his classmates. Then again, compared to the giants above him, he really was small. The boy froze under the scrutiny of several pairs of blue optics.

“No? Go on, tell them, Jack…”

The talons were removed, exposing the human to five scrutinizing stares.

Jack swallowed down the bile that rose to his throat.

“Jack,” a rich voice greeted. The boy glanced up, only to see Optimus falling to a knee, leaning over him. Jack didn’t realize he was leaning away. “Are you well?”

“Now you know what it’s like to be betrayed by Optimus Prime.”

“I’ve been better,” Jack answered, trying to keep the venom out of his voice, but apparently not enough. The Prime’s look was guarded.

“I have been informed of the events transpired since your capture.” A glance at Arcee. His next words were much slower and quieter. “I… am sorry.”

“He was trying to save me.”

Did… the Optimus Prime just apologize? For what? The perfect, legendary guardian of Cybertron. He almost looked… guilty. Was it for failing to protect a defenseless human? For selling him over to Megatron? For sending his own homeworld into civil war?
“But apparently Prime believes leaving you in my care is more merciful.”

Jack was silent, not knowing what to say. It felt like something was tearing at his heart. He was so relieved, to be out of Megatron’s cold clutches and back with his friends, his family. That after everything he had done, they still accepted him. At the same time, it was the Autobots that left him at the mercy of Megatron, who openly wanted to hurt him. Who did hurt him.

And the warlord’s memories were still fresh in his mind. Orion Pax made a promise, to always stand by Megatronus. Instead, he had stood beside Zeta Prime, a monster that called himself the leader of the Autobots. Then Orion stole the mantle of a Prime himself.

Jack shut his eyes at the dull ache behind his eyes. No. That was Megatron’s thoughts. Not his. Optimus was his friend. So why did it still hurt?

He looked away, noticing a pair of figures staring back. Why was he so mad at Miko and Raf, if they were his best friends? Lennox noticed his stare, and misinterpreting the twisted look.

“The Decepticon not only know the outpost’s location, but you and your friends’,” the commander explained. “We’ll put you in protective custody—"

“I want to go home.”

Humans and Autobots alike flinched at the stone command. In the distance, there was a loud thunk as a lob was sent astray and crashed into the wall.

“Jack,” Lennox was the first to break the silence, “think about this. Megatron—”

“Is after me,” Jack finished, whirling around to face the lieutenant. “What’s to stop him from using me to tell him about this base? Or following me here, if he hasn’t already?”

“Which is why we need to keep you here.”

Jack merely shook his head. “And I’m supposed to feel safe? Surrounded by an army of people with targets on their backs?”

“Megatron can’t find you here,” Arcee’s voice came. The boy turned to see the little Autobot approaching them, leaning down so optics met eyes. “You have my word.”

“H-he will. That’s why I can’t stay here.” He turned away from his partner, ignoring her dilating optics of shock, to settle his glare on Lennox. “I want to go home.”

The lieutenant colonel’s look was a mix of confusion and uncertainty, something Jack never expected to see in a military officer of such a high rank. Before the man could reply, Fowler stepped towards them.

“Are you sure about this, son?” the agent asked.

“You’re not my father,” Jack couldn’t help but snap. Fowler blinked, but said nothing.

“Jack has a right to chose,” Optimus spoke.

“Optimus…” Arcee protested, but was silenced with a look.

“We must respect Jack’s freedom. Should he decide what is best for him, then so be it.”
Jack did not have to look at the sage to feel that heavy, dim stare boring into him. The weight on his shoulders felt like the Prime was sitting on him. He tried to ignore it. After several long, tense moments, Lennox let out a heavy sigh.

“I can work something out,” he admitted, reluctantly, “to send you home.”

“Thank you,” Jack replied, curtly, coldly.

He walked away, not looking back at the surprised and hurt gazes following him.

It was a full twenty-four hours until he finally arrived back in Jasper. Stepping out of his military escort’s rental, Jack realized it was irony at its finest. He had spent the better half of the week trying to escape Megatron, and he came back to the place where the Decepticon knew exactly where to find him.

The teen practically crawled through the front door, head hanging low, only to be greeted by a high-pitched sob. Arms wrapped around in his shoulders in a crushing grip, Mom’s face buried in his neck. The son couldn’t even lift his arms to return the embrace. Jack was overrun with guilt that she had been terrified and alone, again. The son braced for the lecture when she finally pulled back. Only for the woman to notice the dark circles under his puffy, red eyes.

June had pity on him, then, helping him settle. She became his nurse for a while, checking over his health and injuries, to find most of the scrapes he had gotten were disappearing. Mom made him one of his favorite meals, which he wolfed down with fervor, and guided him to bed.

Jack went to sleep, his stomach churning and Megatron’s laughter in his dreams.

Jack expected the Decepticons to come, just like they did in Beijing. This time there were no armed forces protecting him. No Autobots. But there were no signs of the extra-terrestrials. The weekend passed uneventfully. And it made Jack all the more edgy.

He began to hate dark rooms. He always expected to see a pair of red optics staring back at him, or see a figure in the blackness. It also reminded him of gloomy halls of the Nemesis, and the oppressive tunnels of Kaon. The boy always kept some sort of light on, unable to sleep without it. Jack scoffed at the fact he was in high school and needed a night light.

Even with the tiny assurance, the military brat spent his nights chasing sleep. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw alien images flash across his vision, many of them too foreign to understand. Sometimes he didn’t sleep at all. Once he woke up in the middle of the night, intense heat radiating across his body. It like his veins were on fire, and all he wanted to do was run away, as if he could escape it. Once the boy awoke to see the tall, menacing dark form of Megatron. His scream woke up his mother on the other side of the house.

Jack’s appetite came and went. One meal the teen could down in all in a few bites. Other times, he would go majority of the day without a thought, until Mom pushed a plate in front of him. He could only try a few bites, and any more sent him to the bathroom.

School was a welcomed distraction, and a horrible reminder. Locked in his room for the weekend, it wasn’t until he arrived on the front steps he realized. Miko and Raf weren’t there. They were with NEST, under the watchful eyes of the U.S. military. Better on a base than a prison, Jack supposed. Still, the empty seats beside him in his classes still made his heart twist painfully. So when lunch
came, the table was eerily clear, and Jack couldn’t bear the thought of being alone. He found Kyle, his co-worker, and he was welcomes.

Jack tried to focus on his work instead, actually trying to listen to the lectures for once. In calculus, he used the tips Raf had given him, and in world history, he was reminded of Miko’s restless nature. Even though, the boy always kept one eye on the closest window, still waiting for the Decepticons to come for him. They never did.

None of his classmates caught on to his constant distress, not even his jumpiness or heavy-lidded eyes. Last thing Jack needed was Vince to have more ammunition against him.

The bully kept up their game from before, sending jeers and balled up pieces of paper (sometimes with tacks in them) at him. Vince only tormented him when a teacher or Sierra wasn’t around. Jack usually bit his tongue and ignored the bully until he went away, fists clenched tight. It wasn’t as successful as he wanted it to be, because it only seemed to spur the boy on. When his back was turned, his backpack mysteriously vanished and somehow got on the top of the flag pole. It wasn’t hard to connect the dots, especially with Vince’s nasally laughter.

Friday finally came, and Jack was exhausted, eager to return to the refuge of his home for the weekend. He practically ran out his last class, making a beeline to his locker.

Jack…

A hammer struck the inside of the army brat’s skull with such force he gripped his head with a wince. Without warning, the hallway tilted and Jack swayed to keep his balance. Only for raw heat to race through his veins. The teen seethed through the pain, stumbling to the closest wall. The white concrete turned into a purple hue. He needed to leave this place.

He didn’t know how he got to the school entrance. He blinked as bright, white light from the opened doors assaulted his vision. The teen rubbed his eyes, the simple action having soreness radiate across his body. He shivered when a chill went down his spine.

He quickly whirled around, gaze locked on his feet, trudging through the sea of people back to his locker. The junior switched out his books and shut the steel door with a slam, revealing a figure next to him. He jumped, but instead of red optics, it was red hair.

“Hey, Jack,” Sierra greeted in a friendly tone. Instantly the boy felt his cheeks heat up, and he prayed they weren’t red.

“Oh, um, hi… Sierra,” he fumbled, wanting to hit himself.

“How come I haven’t seen you around? I noticed you weren’t in homeroom all last week… or at school…”

Jack winced. A couple people asked about his disappearance, which he automatically responded with an elaborate cover story. Now Sierra was asking, of all people. The teenager completely forgot what he told the others.

“I…. was, erm, in… China.”

Sierra seemed completely obvious to his speech impairment, because her eyes lit up in interest.

“Oh, really?” she chirped. “How did that happen?”

Jack figured she wouldn’t take “I was kidnapped by a vicious warlord” very well. “Um… me and
my mom went. As a vacation.”

“During school?”

“Yeah…”

“Lucky.” Sierra rolled her eyes. “Wish my parents would take me out of school. They’re gone for the week to go to the Bahamas.”

“At least you got the place to yourself?” Jack tried, not really knowing to respond, and once again hitting himself for his awkwardness.

“Well, kind of…” A mischievous, rebellious glint appeared in the girl’s eyes as she smiled warmly. “I’m actually throwing a party tomorrow. Everyone’s invited. I… was wondering if you wanted to come. I never see you at any.”

Yeah, spending most of his time with alien robots severely limited his social life. Even though, Jack couldn’t remember the last time he was invited to something, if he was at all. Most kids ignored him. Including Sierra, which made him wonder why she noticed. Was he really that out of it?

Jack wondered how Vince would feel about that. He scanned the hallways with one eye, not seeing any sign of the possessive jerk. Like hell the teenager would let the bully dictate his life. And he had nothing else to do. Miko, Raf, Arcee, and the rest of the Autobots were gone. He was alone, and horribly bored. It might do him good, to act normal for a change.

“Y-yeah, sure,” he answered.

Sierra lit up with excitement, probably because she had one more person to attend her parents-are-away-for-the-weekend party.

“That’s great!” she exclaimed. “It starts at 7:30.”

Jack smiled. “See you there.”

Jack was jittery and excited, and he didn’t know why. Not even the nightmares that plagued his sleep was enough to dampen his mood. Maybe it was because he was finally doing something a teenager should be doing in high school, forgetting about the hell he had been through in the last month—in the last year—and just be himself for once. No responsibility, no burdens, no masks. Just him and the girl that finally—finally noticed him, and personally invited him, when she didn’t have to. Not even Vince or Megatron could ruin that.

Sierra’s home was on the nicer end of town, or what was considered nice for Jasper. Two story, an archway over her front door, a broad, winding driveway, and a large backyard. The house was set aside from the rest of the suburb, so it was less likely to get a noise complaint. It was a good thing, as Jack could hear the blaring music pounding at the window before he opened the car door.

He found out Kyle was going, too, and the pair decided to go together in the teen’s Ford pickup truck. Kyle had to park a block away, as an army of run-down vehicles crowded the sides of the street. There were lingering groups outside on the lawn, escaping the confining building. Sure enough, the inside was full to the brim. Sierra wasn’t kidding, when she said everybody was invited. It seemed like the entire high school had come.
Jack’s classmates wore everything from jeans to flashy dresses, having a myriad of colors flash across his eyes. Most of them were tucked into groups, some so large they took up an entire room. The air was filled with the garble of conversation, trying to speak over the deafening pop songs. The boy could already feel the heat from the suppressive bodies, so he wasn’t surprised several of the windows and even a door was open to let the cool desert air in.

“Bet you can score a girl in here, huh?” Kyle chuckled, clapping him on the shoulder.

“Kyle, even you can get laid in a place like this,” Jack replied sarcastically, following his friend further into the house.

The kitchen counters were filled with refreshments and snacks, mostly typical junk food and a plethora of sodas and drinks. The living room had been converted into a dancefloor, furniture pushed to the side as writhing bodies filled the space. It was there the pair found Sierra.

Jack’s heart fluttered. She looked beautiful. Her long hair, usually in a perfect ponytail, lay across her shoulders in luxurious curls. She had a thin layer of makeup—blush turning her cheeks pink and black mascara bringing out her emerald eyes. The junior wore a modest black dress, but hugged her curves of her body. Her matching pair of heels weren’t tall or skinny, but enough to add a couple inches to her height.

“You made it!” she cried with excitement, breaking from her group of friends.

Jack went stiff as a board as her thin arms wrapped around his shoulders. It was quick, fleeting, friendly. Still, the solid warmth of her body was enough to get the army brat’s heart racing. He must have had a strange look on his face, because Kyle snickered. Sierra was oblivious as she quickly gave them a run down of the place—which all sounded like a blur to Jack—and she vanished as soon as she appeared.

“I think I know who you want to score,” Kyle cackled.

Jack sent a kick towards his shin, but his friend easily dodged it. As social as Kyle was, he was no wingman. He would have better luck with Miko or even Raf as his back-up. It was a pity they couldn’t be here. It wasn’t Miko’s taste in music, but with the amount of people here, she would have a field day. Especially once she realized there was a dancefloor. Jack could already see her doing one of her ridiculous, but energetic dances.

Raf, on the other hand, was not the party type. He was quiet and reserved, preferring the silence of his home over rave music any day. He tended to spend his nights doing next week’s homework or coding on his computer. Because Raf’s introverted self, other students dismissed him, but it was Jack and Miko that found Raf was quite talkative and playful. Jack’s heart twisted, but stamped it down. Tonight, he could just enjoy himself. The boy helped himself to the kitchen, with at least ten other gluttonous students. He wasn’t surprised the beverage cooler that was supposed to be filled with Gatorade was spiked. Jack couldn’t tell with that, only that a harsh, bitter taste assaulted his tongue and burned all the way down his throat.

Mom did everything in her power to keep her son from underaged drinking, going as far as forbidding any alcohol in the house. She continuously told him horror stories. Drunk driving accidents, alcohol poison, and even a liver transplant of a 30-year-old alcoholic. Between being constantly discouraged and not having any access to it, Jack never really experimented with drinking. The most he had was a few sips of wine or beer, and each one sent him recoiling with its bitter taste.

However, this time, he held his breath as he tilted the cup and sent its contents down his throat. The
drink was enough to give him enough courage to venture on the dancefloor, even lasting a few songs. Jack ventured back to the kitchen, helping himself to a second.

He then traveled room to room, talking about idle things with the other kids. He didn’t even remember what most of them were about. The army brat found Vince and his posy in one room, and he retreated from the bully’s leer. He had enough of a headache as it was. Jack lost track of Kyle. He just hoped the teen was sober enough to get them home. The boy thought he had a third drink—he wasn’t sure.

Jack found himself on the steps of the back patio, tuning out the pulsing music and the laughing and the murmur of conversation. He placed a hand on his clammy forehead, to find his hair wet with his own sweat. The alcohol was disagreeing with his stomach, having it churn in nausea. Jack focused on breathing through his nose. His vision was blurry and everything was muted, like he was in a fog. Occasionally colors flashed in a purple shade.

“Hey,” a soft voice came. Jack looked over to see Sierra standing over him, nearing cautiously. Even after constantly moving for hours, she still looked perfect. “You okay?”

Not wanting to admit to his current state, the teenager replied, “Yeah, just getting some fresh air.”

He was surprised she sat down on the step next him, settling with unnatural grace. Jack scolded his heart for already reacting her presence, and he prayed he wasn’t drunk enough to say something stupid.

“How come I never see you around?” Sierra asked, more out of curiosity than anything.

“I’m here now, aren’t I?” Jack replied.

“Yeah, but I mean around town. At the mall, at the movies…”

“It’s… complicated,” Jack said slowly. He didn’t think he was lucid enough to come up with a lie. “There’s… stuff… I have to do.”

There was a pause of silence, before Sierra said quietly, “I guess it must be hard for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I know you been through a lot.” She had no idea. “Moving to a place like Jasper must be a real shock to you, coming from Washington from all places.” It took a few seconds for Jack’s blurred mind to realize she meant the District, not the state. Living in both places, he preferred it if someone specified. “And… what happened to your dad. I couldn’t imagine that, losing a parent…”

Jack swallowed and looked away. Sierra immediately noticed her mistake.

“Oh, my gosh, I’m sorry,” she hastily apologized. “That was a shitty thing to say…”

“No, no, it’s fine,” the junior excused. “I… I need to move on. It’s been three—four?—years. God, has it been really been that long?”

“Yeah, you’ve been in Jasper for a while.” Another pause. “Do you want to go back?”

“What?”

“Back to… Washington, when you graduate.”

Oh, yeah, Jack guessed it was time to talk about that. His junior year was coming a close. In the fall,
he would be a senior, and he would have to decide what he wanted to do in life. When the teen couldn’t even figure out his life right now.

“I don’t know, maybe,” Jack confessed. “I mean, when I first got here, all I thought about was getting the hell out of here. But… now, it feels like… home.”

“I would like it, if you stayed,” Sierra confessed in a low murmur.

Jack glanced at her, cocking an eyebrow. He opened his mouth to say something, anything, but a hostile voice cut him off. Completely destroying the moment.

“What are you doing out here, Darby?” Vince demanded. Jack looked over his shoulder to see the bully glaring down at him, nostrils flaring like a raging bull.

“Nothing, Vince,” the teenager sighed, standing up. He took a step to go back inside, but Vince blocked his path.

“You don’t think I don’t know what going on here? I’ve been watching you, how you been following Sierra around like some creep. Thought you could get a taste of my girl before you calling it a night, huh?”

“Your girl?”

“Vince, calm down, it’s nothing,” Sierra interrupted, her soft voice edged with panic. Jack couldn’t help it.

“What if Sierra wants me instead of you?” he boldly spat. He would blame the alcohol later. “You have no right to make her decisions for her.”

“Every sentient being has the right to choose their own destiny.”

“She’s my girlfriend, so that means I can and I will!”

“Your pet belongs to me now.”

By now Sierra was on her feet. She took in the sight of the two tall and lean boys sizing each other up, hands clenched at their sides.

“Vince, stop it!” she demanded, trying to defuse the situation. When Vince acted like he didn’t hear her, she turned to Jack. “Jack, please, just go.”

“Yeah, Jack, go,” Vince ordered in a venomous spat, stepping forward. Jack could smell the spiked Gatorade on his breath. “No one wants you here.” Another step forward. The teenager kept his ground. “You’re just an army brat who thinks you’re all that, when your just another weird little freak.”

Jack’s veins filled with that hot, burning hate. Every muscle in his body tensed, his nails digging painfully in his palm. His blurry vision focused, like he was looking down a tunnel. The boy clamped down the adrenaline rush, letting out a shaky sigh. Vince was drunk. This vermin wasn’t worth it. Jack forced himself past the insect, trying to disappear back into the crowd. Vince wasn’t done yet, his glare never leaving him.

“You own father didn’t even want you!”

Jack froze.
“No wonder he left you!”

Suddenly a bright, violet hue colored his vision. The music, the people, the laughter and yells, all vanished in a muted garble. Along with the rest of his senses. Jack didn’t know what happened next. Only that a surge he never felt before filled his chest.

Images flickered across his eyes and muffled sounds touched his hearing. Jack yelled something, loud and vicious. Suddenly something was wrapping around his arms, pulling him back. He resisted, pushing forward, but the crushing grip didn’t relent.

“Hey, lay off, man!”

Jack blinked. He became aware of a set of hands on each arm, tugging him back. He recognized two of the linebackers from the football team, each twice his weight despite being the same age as him. Suddenly a low, throaty moan filled the air. Jack looked towards the source, only to flinch.

Vince was flat on his back across the grass of the yard, barely moving. His face was bloody and his nose was crooked. His chest fluttered unevenly. His friends were crouching over him, tentatively touching him, as if they would hurt him even more.

Then the world was slowly returning. Jack started at the empty backyard was suddenly filled with people, wide eyes flickering between the two boys. He spotted Sierra, pressing against her friends. There were tears in her eyes and her lip was quivering, staring at him with something Jack recognized.

“S-Sierra,” Jack gasped, not realizing how slurred his voice sounded.

“Jack, please, leave…” Sierra whimpered, her voice high-pitched. Her friends held her tighter. “Please…”

Jack widened his eyes. Was... she scared of him? The boy glanced down at his hands. His knuckles were split and covered in crimson blood. Was that his? Or Vince’s?

What happened?
Jack almost fell flat on his face when the linebackers hesitantly released him. Whatever had invaded his veins was gone; the adrenaline rush fading away. Now his body was shaking and his knees were weak. His mind retreated back to that blurred fog, the world listing this way and that. The nausea was so vicious that Jack thought he would heave then and there.

It was the countless stares boring into him that kept him from folding in on himself. Suddenly he saw a flash of blonde hair—Kyle. His eyes were wide, but not filled with the same terror as the rest of them.

“Whoa, you okay, dude?” he gasped.

“H-help me get back to the car,” Jack replied in a low stammer.

He underestimated Kyle’s loyalty, because the teenager took an arm and guided him through the house. Jack tried not to lean on him, ending up wobbling the whole way. He must have looked like a drunk idiot, but instead hushed whispers followed him.

“Did you see what happened?”

“He just went off on him…”

“Crazy…”

Jack didn’t remember making it to the truck. Only that Kyle all but threw him in the passenger seat. The military brat buried his sweaty face in his bloody, trembling hands.

“W-what happened?” Jack slurred as Kyle started up the truck, its engine roaring to life. The other boy snapped his gaze towards him.

“You don’t remember?” his co-worker gasped. “How wasted are you?”

Even in Jack’s distorted reality, it wasn’t hard to put the pieces together. “I had a fight with Vince.”

“Fight?” Kyle tore down the street, his driving uneven. Apparently the teenager hadn’t sobered much since his last drink. “You destroyed him! You almost twisted his arm off and threw him like—ten feet!”

He did that? Jack didn’t remember that. He just remembered be so angry.

“I… just wanted him to shut up,” the teenager confessed in a whisper.


Jack’s heart stopped. He really said that? “I—I didn’t mean it.”
He didn’t sound as convincing as he wanted, and Kyle made a face. The drive to his home went by in a blur. He only remembered thinking his “designated driver” was going too fast, and went onto the wrong side of the road more than once. Thankfully, they made it to his house without getting pulled over. His mom would have a heart attack if she got a call from the sheriff.

“Are you going to be okay?” Kyle asked as Jack stumbled out of the car.


With that, the army brat slammed the door shut and stumbled to his home. By some miracle, Mom wasn’t home yet. She must have been caught up at her shift at the hospital. It was a good thing, too, because it took Jack a solid minute to unlock the front door.

He stepped into the foyer, only for the world to list. The boy took another step, only the floor sloped upward, like he was walking up a hill. Jack caught himself on the wall before he fell to the ground, his knuckles white as he latched on.

You’re so weak.

Jack jumped at the voice. He scanned the dark foyer, expecting to see red optics. Nothing.

It’s just in your head, Jack, the boy told himself. You’re drunk.

It was then the nausea came up his throat. Jack gagged and raced to the bathroom. His legs barely carried him, and he practically collapsed as he stepped through the threshold. He fell over the toilet, purging whatever poison was in his system. The distraught boy tried to pull away several times, only when he tilted his head up, the room spun and he heaved again. Jack didn’t know what he was throwing up—the only thing left in his stomach was purple acid.

They don’t know you, not like I do.

Jack collapsed against the wall. He was a shaking mess, curled up and whimpering. His headache had evolved into a migraine, pounding against his skull with cruel viciousness. The agony spread across his limbs, cementing him to the floor.

Jack…

Jack opened his eyes, half-lidded. He greeted with a dark, foreboding figure standing above him.

“You’re not real,” he told the phantom.

Look at yourself. The Autobots have abandoned you. Your friends don’t care about you.

“Shut up,” Jack breathed, shutting his eyes tight. He opened them, only to be greeted by blood-red optics. He flinched away, only for his back to ram into the wall.

I am the only one that you can rely upon now.

“No.”

He jumped when he felt a cold touch on his cheek. Faint, ghost-like. It sent chills down his spine.

Give in to me, my pet.

The heat in his veins went cold. The surge came up from his chest, filling his entire body. Jack’s
June was exhausted when she pulled up in the driveway of her home. Her twelve-hour shift had drained her, as it had sent her back and forth across the hospital, from treating one patient to the next. She was eager to take a long, hot shower and curl under the covers. Maybe she and Jack could watch a movie. It would do them both some good.

The woman let out a tired yawn as she climbed out of the car and stumbled to the garage door that led into the kitchen. She started when Jack’s form greeted her.

“Honey, you scared me,” she gasped. She meant to laugh it off, but it died when her throat when Jack didn’t reply.

Her son took a step forward, like she wasn’t there. He stopped his advance when June clasped his shoulders.

“Jack? What’s wrong?” she asked, her voice filled with concern.

She knew her son. Something was wrong. He didn’t reply. The mother shook his shoulders, gently, trying to get his attention. Finally he looked up, meeting her gaze.

June gasped when she looked into Jack’s eyes.

Without warning, crushing hands seized her arms, almost painful. She yelped in surprise, but before she could protest, the world suddenly panned. The woman cried out as she was thrown to the ground, her head colliding against the wall. Usually Jack would have reacted immediately to his mother’s shout of pain. Instead, he merely ripped the keys out of her hand and stepped over her fallen form.

“Jack!”

Her plea was cut off as the door slammed shut.

Fowler didn’t get it. A whole week, and not a single peep from the Decepticons.

No attacks, no confrontations, no chatter, no sightings. Not so much as video filmed by a potato posted on the Internet. Raf checked.

“Calm before the storm?” Lennox had guessed.

Optimus only said it was uncharacteristic, to say the least. Megatron disliked giving his enemy a chance to regroup, doing anything in his power to build on a tactical advantage he may claim. Furthermore, with the numbers under his command, the warlord had no reason for a tactical retreat.

So it was a waiting game, then. All Lennox could do was monitor the energon detectors scattered across the globe. The Autobots and NEST forces sat around the base, tense and ready to react when the word finally came. In the meantime, Fowler and Lennox had to deal with their unexpected guests.
Miko and Raf were given suites away from the main bustle of the base and close to the Autobots. They generally didn’t cause trouble, until Miko happened. The girl would find a way to break into restricted areas, sometimes messing the soldiers or the equipment she should not be touching. Usually someone would find her and drag her back to the Autobots, leaving her to the mercy of Fowler or Lennox or Bulkhead.

The liaison and the lieutenant worked together on the conditions of their protection. They tried to put together a cover story to explain to their parents, and better yet, the officers’ superiors. General Bryce or Galloway only needed to make a surprise “visit” and all hell would spring loose.

Simmons was another story. He was signed on a consultant from Sector Seven, which no one seemed happy about, not even Optimus Prime. But surprisingly, he behaved. He stayed away the Autobots, usually keeping on the other side of the base from them. In fact, Fowler hardly saw him at all, and a couple times the liaison forgot he was even around. Which resulted in two heart attacks when the silent agent crept up on him. It made Fowler wonder what Simmons was up to, hiding in the shadows like he was.

And somehow, they had to convince Jack to accept their terms. Fowler knew the traumatized boy needed time, but isolating himself from those who cared about him wasn’t going to help. If anything, it made him an easier target for the Decepticons. He only hoped he was doing alright…

Fowler’s cell phone rang, high and shrill. He cocked an eyebrow when recognized the number, and couldn’t explain the fluttering of his heart. He answered it as professionally as always.

“Bill,” June’s voice came through. Fowler blinked at the high-pitched, sniveling whine of her voice, like she had been crying. “It’s—it’s Jack. Something’s wrong…”

Arcee had weapons training. Most of the “targets” were unused barrels, abandoned vehicles, or scrap metal—anything useless for the Autobots to shoot at and vaporize. The two-wheeler pictured every one as a Decepticon—more specifically, Megatron. She saw his sneer, his glare, his face looking back at her.

“Your pet belongs to me now,” the tyrant taunted.

Arcee shot the totaled Humvee into unrecognizable scrap. Jack didn’t belong to anyone. He was a free soul, and he always had a choice. If he chose to never see her again, then so be it.

It wasn’t until Bumblebee commed her, concerned and panicked, she finally pulled away. Not without one last shot at Megatron’s imaginary helm. She should have aimed better, when he was in point-blank range.

Arcee didn’t believe him when Fowler told them what happened.

“Jack would never attack June,” the two-wheeler declared.

“Is she harmed?” Optimus questioned.

“No, just shaken up,” Fowler answered. “She said he just took the car and left.”

Arcee also knew Jack would never run away. He wouldn’t leave his mother all alone.

“He couldn’t have gotten far,” the agent went on. “Jack’s got to be somewhere in the desert around
Arcee’s gaze hardened. “Then let’s go find him.”

“He’s on the other side of the planet. How are we going to get there: drive?” Bulkhead demanded, waving in his hands exasperatedly.

“I say it’s a good time to test the new groundbridge,” Ironhide rumbled, glancing at Ratchet.

“Epepep!” the medic sputtered. “We haven’t even confirmed if the trajectory fluctuations have been stabilized!”

“Then let’s stabilize them and let’s go!” Smokescreen exclaimed.

“It’s not that simple!”

“Ratchet, every moment we spend sitting around here, Jack gets further away,” Arcee ranted, waving her own arms. “We need to get to Jasper now.”

The medic looked into the fierce determination that filled her optics. The old Autobot knew there was no changing her mind. He looked to Optimus, his leader nodding with that same look. Ratchet sighed.

“Tell Rafael I require his assistance,” the medic ordered, turning to meddle with the computer.

Fowler nodded and ran off to collect the boy. He returned a few minutes later, the teenagers on his heels. The Hispanic boy immediately ran up the raised platform, settling on the floor and placing his laptop on his legs. He needed no encouragement to start typing away.

“We’re going back to Jasper?” Miko asked.

“Jack’s gone missing,” Arcee replied.

The Japanese girl’s eyes lit up in alarm. “Do you think Megatron took him?”

“He ran away.”

She ignored Miko’s puzzled look, instead never prying her gaze from Ratchet. The next several breems were filled with the Autobots anxiously waiting for the former scientist to finish. Bumblebee paced, Bulkhead held a worked up Miko, and Optimus and Arcee were still as statues. Even the Autobots who hardly knew the boy were restless—Ironhide and Smokescreen shifting their weight, Mirage engaging and disengaging his blades in a nervous tick, and the twins shifting their pedes to wheels to roll around anxiously.

Suddenly, after too long of a time of waiting, Raf exclaimed something in joy. Ratchet let out a shout of triumph. Then the groundbridge appeared in an explosion of bright colors. There were cheers and praises from the Autobots. Not surprisingly, Optimus only ordered his team to go first. They could call for reinforcements if needed.

“The old jewelry factory,” Miko suddenly spoke up. Arcee gave her a curious glance, cocking an optic ridge. “That’s where Megatron likes to meet up.”

The motorcycle nodded, and the Autobots rolled through the bridge.

The desert was black, cold, and empty on the other side. The mountains that hid their former base were silhouetted against the starry canvas of the sky. A few miles in the distance, the town of Jasper
glowed brilliantly with artificial light, polluting the darkness of the night. No sign of the Decepticons. No sign of Jack.

Logic dictated to search the town first, but not according to Miko. Arcee pivoted her front tire towards the direction of abandoned factory. It had been thoroughly leveled from the last time, but it was a start. The motorcycle sped across the flat, crack ground. She didn’t realize she was going so fast she was ahead of the rest of the team, until Optimus ordered her to return to formation. She obeyed her leader, but it just sent impatient worry through her systems. She needed to find her partner. She needed to know he was okay.

In reality it was only a matter of minutes, but it felt like eternity had gone by when suddenly Bumblebee whirred in alarm. In the distance was a white streak, looking gray in the dimness of the night. It looked like June’s car, and sure enough, it was speeding towards the ruined factory. Away from civilization.

Rather than meet it head on, the Autobots raced forward to intercept it. Arcee skidded to a halt, transforming before she came to a complete stop. The others followed her example. Peering at the human vehicle, it was definitely June’s car, and Arcee detected Jack’s biosignature within. The car continued to speed towards them, and the Autobot feared Jack would actually ram into them. Seconds before impact, the vehicle came to a halt, throwing up dust into the air. There was a clicking of a car door opening and Jack’s lean form stepped out of the driver’s side.

“Jack, what’s gotten into you?” Arcee demanded, stepping forward. When her charge didn’t reply, she added, “You scared your mother half to death.”

She knelt in front of him, but Jack still didn’t reply. He didn’t even meet her gaze. Instead his lips pulled down in a frown like a pout. Why wasn’t he talking to her? Was he really still mad at her? Or…

“Did Megatron get to you?” Arcee demanded, daring to place her servo on his shoulder. “Did he tell you to do this?”

Suddenly there was a groan, deep and strained, coming from Jack’s chest. He shifted, like he was trying to flinch away, but the guardian held him firm.

“Jack, talk to me,” she ordered.

Then she noticed his eyes. Without warning, a single shudder went through Arcee’s frame, reaching all the way to her spark. She froze, as if his gaze alone put her stasis lock. Suddenly Jack blinked.

“Ar…cee?” he slurred, sounding exhausted and confused. “What are you doing here?”

It was the Autobots’ turn to blink. Arcee, for the first time in her existence, was speechless. Before she could even process any sort of reply, Jack suddenly let out a harsh yell. He ripped away from her grip, doubling over and gripping his head.

“Jack? What’s wrong?” Arcee panicked, moving forward again when her charge stepped back.

His eyes were shut tight as he writhed, as if in pain. The guardian touched him, gently, as if she could make it go away. The teenager only jerked away once again, so violently and suddenly that he tripped over his own feet. He fell to his side, moaning and shaking. Arcee was at his side in an instant, wings up in her distress. Batting away his flailing limbs, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pressing him against her chassis.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” the guardian cooed, hoping her familiar voice could reach him.
Just as soon as the fit started, Jack ceased his struggles with a tired sigh. She felt his rigid muscles relax and he slumped against her chest. Arcee ran her servo down his back, comfortingly.

“I’m here now,” she whispered softly, barely audible. Jack’s eyes fluttered closed with a defeated moan. Arcee placed a tentative servo on his warm cheek, a gentle finger stroking his brow. “I’m here…”

If Simmons had learned anything from his career in government, is that everybody had a skeleton in their closest. The elite, so-called perfect men of NEST were no expectation. Jenkins had a DUI in high school, Marquez stole prescription drugs from his local pharmacy, and Rollins had been to one or two rallies set up by Neo-Nazis. That was just the tip of the iceberg. Lennox wasn’t kidding—anybody could be the mole.

They all fit the profile—low income, high stress, looking for a place to belong. Simmons found that usually money was the biggest motivation—maybe the spy got a cut for handing over goodies to MECH. Sometimes personal belief was a big factor, maybe the spy got tired of being pushed around and wanted a to take a new meaning to freedom. Maybe he was just a lunatic.

Simmons was getting close, though. He ticked off a lot of names, for a lot of different reasons—no motive, no access, or too stupid. Some names stood out more than others, and the Sector Seven consultant considered the possibility of more than one mole.

Simmons found Chief Master Sergeant Robert Epps easily enough. The Air Force soldier greeted him with the warmth of a corpse. He didn’t even stop his inspection on the Raptor. His bald head was shiny with sweat.

“So I understand you come from a rough neighborhood,” Simmons started.

“Depends on your definition of ‘rough,’” Epps dismissed.

“Gang-type of rough.” Epps froze. “You wouldn’t happen to know a Dante Epps?”

“I don’t answer for my cousin.”

“You were in the same—”

Epps threw down the wrench with more force than necessary and stepped forward to tower over the scrawny agent. The soldier was solid muscle, standing almost a foot taller than Simmons and almost twice as broad. His dark glare and unmoving frown was intimidating enough to send a Decepticon running.

“That was a long time ago,” the man growled venomously. “I’m good now. I got out, I went to the academy. Got myself straight.”

“It’s always an honor to serve your country,” Simmons commented, watching for a reaction.

“I would give my life for the flag in a heartbeat.”

At least Simmons could tick off another name. There was a difference between serving and dying for a country. His interrogation was interrupted by Lennox’s shout, hailing Epps. The sergeant gave one more heated glare at the agent and stormed away. Simmons followed, having to quicken his steps to keep up with Lennox’s fast pace.
“Where’s the fire?” the agent asked.

Lennox glanced over his shoulder at Simmons. There was a pause as the man considered answering him. Apparently he decided there was no harm, as he answered, “The Autobots are bringing Jack in.”

It didn’t sound like a good thing. “Alien magnet strikes again?”

“I don’t know.”

Lennox really must have been stressed, if he didn’t even protest Simmons’s presence. Especially when they walked in the Hanger E, the NBEs’ (Autobots, whatever) private quarters. However, the giant extra-terrestrials did not fail.

“What is he doing here?” the big black one snarled, the metal that made its face twisting. It almost looked disgusted. It was amazing, how expressive these robots were.

Before any of the humans could answer, a high-pitched hum filled the air. Simmons blinked and had to shield his eyes from the intensity of the swirling light. That would burn his retinas for quite a while. There were flashes as five different models of vehicles pulled through.

The vortex vanished from the existence, only for the blissful silence to shatter. The green Humvee bellowed in pain its backseat window fractured into a million little pieces with an awful noise. Before the shards of glass even fell to the floor, Jack Darby scrambled out of the newfound exit. His feet came out first, allowing him to land nimbly on the ground, only to freeze.

His head turned in every direction, like he was trying to see all his surroundings at once. As if he didn’t know where he was. When the boy took in the sight of ten baffled Autobots, it seemed to snap him out of his frozen terror. He bolted, towards the closest exit.

“Stop him!” Lennox barked.

It was the flashy red Ferrari that lithely lunged in front of the teenager’s path. Although the NBE was smaller than some of the other aliens, the concert floor quivered when he landed. Darby even stumbled before skidding to a halt.

“Where are you going?” the robot demanded threateningly, but the boy glared in response.

He bolted in another direction, just before the yellow Camaro could snatch him. The ‘Bot let out a high-pitched beep, which sounded like a plea.

“Jack! What are you doing?” a young Hispanic boy yelped, watching the absurd skeptical with wide eyes.

“He cut it out!” the Japanese girl yelled, but her friend ignored her as he leaped away from another outstretched metal hand.

Darby took off in another sprint, but this time Lennox and Fowler were able to close the distance. Fowler stepped in front of the runaway, but teenager was going to fast to stop. He slammed into the agent, but the ex-Ranger held firm as he grabbed the boy’s shoulders in a vice grip.

“Stop!” Fowler barked, filling his voice with authority. Darby made a strange noise from his throat. Was that a growl? However, that was not what made Fowler gasp in shock. “The hell…?”

Then without warning, there was a blur of movement. A slap of skin on skin filled the air as Darby’s
fist collided with Fowler’s cheek. The man yelled in pain and he crumbled to the floor.

Before Darby could make another run for it, Lennox lunged onto his back. The teenager bent forward at the extra weight, trying to correct himself, but didn’t crash into the ground. He madly flailed when Lennox’s arm wrapped around his neck.

“Enough,” the lieutenant colonel ordered in the same tone he spoke with his men. Darby defied him by clawing at the restricting limb. Seeing the boy was trapped in the chokehold, Epps took a few steps towards him to aid his commander. Simmons saw his mistake the same time Lennox did.

“Epps, stay back!”

His warning came too late. Epps stepped in front of the captive, just in range. The boy’s legs struck out, his heels landing right on his chest. The soldier grunted as he was sent flat on his back. At the same time, the added momentum made Lennox stagger, his grip loosening. Giving Darby enough leverage to pull on the limb and duck his head out of the man’s grip.

However, he didn’t let go. The boy spun around as he stepped away, twisting Lennox’s arm with it. The lieutenant colonel wheezed in pain. Before he could retaliate, Darby twisted again, this time dragging the man’s entire body with him. Lennox’s groan turned into a yell as he was swung around and thrown to the floor. Simmons’s eyebrows shot to his hairline. There was no way that a high school student just—

“He’s got a gun!” Fowler cried.

Sure enough, Simmons’s gaze locked on the shiny black object in the boy’s tight grip. He didn’t even see when Darby managed to pull the pistol from Lennox’s belt. He must have cursed, loudly, because suddenly the boy’s gaze snapped towards him.

Allowing Simmons to meet deep, unnatural violet eyes.

What in the— His thoughts were once again broken as Darby scowled, which looked too much like a crooked smile. Simmons instantly recoiled when he raised the gun into air, aiming its barrel right at the man. Who was no where near cover. The agent saw the kid’s index finger slip onto the trigger, squeezing.

“Stop it!”

A blue, metal arm shot out, a metal hand covering Darby’s. A clap of thunder filled the air, but Simmons did not feel the bullet sink into his heart. Instead, there was a clinking sound as the projectile ricocheted off the floor. The motorcycle tried to pry the pistol out of Darby’s hand, only for the boy to pull back. Simmons knew the alien could easily overpower the frail human and toss him into the air like a ragdoll, but almost like she… holding back. All the while the kid was trying to strike back.

He sent several desperate kicks to her stomach and side, each hit making a clanging sound. Darby tried raise the weapon, as if trying to aim it towards her helm, only for the NBE to shove it back down. As they grabbled, Simmons looked around in a panic. Suddenly his gaze locked onto a bright red object.

“Jack, it’s me! Arcee!” the motorcycle cried. “Why are you doing this?!”

The teenaged ignored her plea as he used the added space between them for leverage. He landed a powerful kick to her middle, not enough to send her down, but caused her to stumble. She moved to lunge again, only to freeze when she realized the barrel was pointed at her left optic. Arcee made a
low, but high-pitched whine, almost like a keen. Darby was locked on target, not noticing Simmons
stalking towards him with surprising stealth.

The agent sent the fire extinguisher into the back of the kid’s head—not with all his strength, but
enough to send his neck snapping forward. Jack Darby let out a strained moan and crumbled to the
ground, out like a light.

“Simmons!” Lennox’s shout came, scolding.

“You’re welcome,” the agent replied.

“Everybody alright?” the lieutenant colonel demanded as he got to his feet, rolling the shoulder that
the kid had painfully pulled.

“More or less,” Fowler grumbled, holding his face. Pulling his hand away, revealed a bloody cheek,
a dark bruise already forming around the cut below his eye. It would look worse later.

“Damn that kid has a kick,” Epps complained.

“And some major anger management issues,” Simmons added.

“That wasn’t Jack,” a voice snapped. The humans looked over to see the motorcycle propping the
boy’s upper body on her knee, arms around his shoulders. Protectively or possessively, Simmosn
couldn’t tell. He noticed her eyes were brighter than normal. “He would never—” She paused, as if
she didn’t know how to finish that statement. Then her eyes narrowed. “Never.”

Yeah, I noticed something was off,” Fowler stated in venomous sarcasm.

“What gave it away? The ninja moves or the crazy eyes?” Simmons quipped.

“You noticed that, too, huh?’

During the conversation, the Sector Seven agent didn’t fail to notice the big blue and red truck
exchange glanced with the red and white ambulance.

“With your permission, Commander Lennox,” the truck rumbled in a deep, rich tone, “we can run a
diagnostics until your medical staff arrives.”

“Go for it,” Lennox allowed, waving a hand.

With that, Arcee plucked up the kid with surprising gentleness, a hand around his shoulders and the
other around his knees. She carried him over to another section of the hanger, closed off from the
main space. The adults lingered behind, shooing away the two curious and concerned teens, as the
leader, Prime, and the medic followed suit.

The motorcycle had just placed Darby on one of the spare gurneys when the ambulance knelt down.
Simmons watched, perplexed, as the medic raised his arm over the kid and the plating shifted.
Suddenly a bright beam of light encased the boy, scanning over his body. It shut off and the NBE
meddled with a datapad attached to his wrist.

“Nothing superficial,” the medic reported. “No sign of injury. There’s seems to be a lack of vitamins
in his system, but other than that…”

“Try a deep scan, Ratchet,” Arcee ordered.

Ratchet obeyed, repeating the process from before. The humans waited and watched the Autobot as
he returned his attention to his datapad. Only for every wire in the robot’s body to freeze. Suddenly a staticky, stuttering sound came, like a broken air conditioning unit.

“Wait… How is this possible…” the medic gasped. His eyes, which had doubled in size, were so bright it hurt to look up at him.

“What?” the motorcycle demanded, stepping forward. “What is it?”

Ratchet merely shook his head, as if he didn’t believe was he was seeing. He stammered for words, and Simmons didn’t know robots could stammer. “Jack’s been… infected with dark energon.”

There was a silence for a solid three seconds as every being in the room froze. Then everyone shouted protests at once.

“Dark what?” Simmons echoed.

“There’s no way…” denied Lennox.

“That’s impossible!” the motorcycle proclaimed.

“How in the name of the Star-Bangled Banner is that possible?!” raved Fowler.

Simmons knew quite well what energon was. Nasty stuff. Radioactive, Sector Seven scientists could only near it with hazmat suits on, and only for a limited duration. He’d seen one to many accidents where they had cut into NBE-1’s (or Mega-something’s) fuel lines, or they attempted to bring in samples they had mined. He never heard of “dark energon,” though. Or a human full of it.

“Ratchet, a human can’t process energon,” the motorcycle argued. “Never mind dark energon! I mean, we can’t even stand its effects!”

“You are correct in saying that it is no ordinary energon,” Prime rumbled. “But it stands to reason, if Megatron can build an immunity against it, other beings may as well.”

“Wait, how do we know its not poisoning him?” Lennox demanded, waving a hand.

Epps gestured towards the main lobby, snapping, “Did you see what happened?”

“Time out!” Simmons shouted, pressing the tips of his fingers to his palm to make a “T.” “What the hell is dark energon?”

“A corrupted energon, said to have bled from Unicron in his battle against the Thirteen Primes,” Ratchet told. “As it is the blood of the Harbinger of Destruction, well, it destroys anything it touches. Specifically, those with the blood of Primus.”

Simmons shook is head at the myriad of names. Unicron? Primus? Damn, the robots had their own cult religion, too?

“But you just said Megatron is immune to it.”

“…If one does manage to control it, dark energon has… unique regenerative properties,” Ratchet explained. “Including raising the undead…”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Simmons shouted in alarm. “Undead as in—” He raised his arms in front of him and shifted his weight in a rigid, slow manner. Lennox rolled his eyes at his imitation. “—The Walking Dead undead?”
When the NBEs just stared, Fowler elaborated, “Yes, it creates Zombiecons. Megatron raised a whole army of them to lead a full-scale invasion.”

No one told him that. Zombie giant alien robots. Now Simmons had heard it all.

“Wait—” Arcee gasped. “If Megatron can use dark energon to control an entire legion of the undead.” She paused, and she made a static-like sound. “You—you don’t think…”

Prime narrowed his eyes, the metal that formed his lips pulling a grave frown. His voice was lower than usual. “It stands to reason…”

Arcee’s eyes doubled in side and a strange shudder ran through her. Simmons glanced between the giants.

“Stands to reason what?” the agent echoed.

It was Ratchet that answered, his voice strained and staticky. “If Jack is corrupted with dark energon, and in the all likelihood it was Megatron that gave it to him…” The medic settled a pitiful gaze on the unmoving teenager. “Megatron has been using the dark energon to control Jack…”
Devil's Snare

Chapter Notes

So remember that subplot I introduced in Chapter 10? Yeah, we're just now getting to that.

_Darkness. All Jack saw was darkness._

*It pressed against him, suffocating. Jack tried to breathe, only for no air to come his lungs. Instead, he felt the deep cold impede into his skin, sinking to his bones. He felt the weight of the inky blackness drag him down and down, into the never-ending abyss._

*Where wicked optics awaited him._

Jack gasped awake, greedily trying to fill his empty lungs. Only for harsh, white light to assault his eyes. He shut his eyes tight and groaned, only for air to pass over his dry throat. He broke into a coughing fit. The boy tried to bring a hand to his face, but he found it heavy, unable to lift it.

Jack didn’t how long the fit lasted—a few seconds or a few minutes. It died down to a few muffled convulsions until he could only heave desperately. He attempted to open his eyes again, this time slowly. Sure enough, he was greeted with fluorescent light glaring down at him. He squinted as the dull headache worsened. He waited a solid minute for his blurry gaze to adjust before he scanned his surroundings.

He was met with grayish-white walls. Jack shifted, only to feel rough cotton against his skin and hard plush underneath him. A bed? Complete with railings on the side, to keep him in place. He glanced to his left, and sure enough, there was a machine, with a screen filled with numbers and a pulsing line. Confusion filled the teenager. Why was he in the hospital?

Jack shut his eyes, trying to remember, only for a pulsing headache to assault the fog of his mind. His limbs were heavy and sore. The teenager groaned again, remembering. He was… at the party. So this was what a hangover felt like. The rumors were true. It _sucked._

He was with Sierra, talking, and then… The boy furrowed his eyebrows to fight off the migraine. He remembered Kyle had taken him to his car. The army brat flinched. _Oh, no._

He… did make it home, right? He only remembered a dark blur—pain and fear and a cold touch. Jack’s heart rate spiked, the machine letting out a warning beep. If he was in the hospital… then he _didn’t_ make it home. What about Kyle? Was he okay?

Jack shifted, trying to readjust his weight to sit up. He ignored the pain radiating across his body, but froze at the cold, smooth touch on his wrist. Accompanied by a _clanking_ sound. Sure enough, when the teen tried raise his arms, they stayed in place—_pinned._

Jack glanced down, only for his blood to run cold. On each of his wrists was a metal gray cuff, attached to the railing of the bed. No, no, no. The boy had seen enough cop shows. He was _arrested?_ Why? Oh, no, they found out—the cops caught him drunk and threw him in here. Mom was gonna freak!
Before Jack could have a panic attack over his doomed fate, suddenly he heard the clicking of a lock being disengaged and the door opening. He glanced up, only for his confusion to grow.

“L-Lennox?” he croaked, only to flinch at his hoarse voice. “What are you doing here?”

Part of Jack couldn’t help but feel relieved. Maybe the NEST commander could help him out of this mess, somehow. The man only blinked at the question, as if it was absurd.

Then he asked slowly, cautiously, “How are you feeling?”

“Like shit,” Jack admitted. He paused hesitantly before daring to say, “I guess that’s why I’m in the hospital, huh?” He raised his arm as much it was go, waving to emphasize the chain clamped to his wrist.

Now Lennox’s face twisted in puzzlement. He was still for a moment, before he stepped closer to the boy. His voice was surprisingly soft for a high-ranking soldier.

“How are you feeling?” the man asked.

“Do you know where you are, Jack?”

It was the teenager’s turn to blink. “Um, S-St. Mary’s.” When Lennox just stared, he added, “Jasper.”

He watched the man’s Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed thickly. He shook his head, slowly.

“You’re in Diego Garcia.”

Whatever fog that clouded Jack’s mind cleared at the single statement. Whatever breath he had died in his throat as every muscle went rigid. He glanced at the door, noticing the lock latched in place. Hospital doors didn’t lock. There were no windows, like in most rooms. Only lifeless, concrete walls. Like a prison.

“How did—I g-get here?” Jack stammered, not realizing his teeth were chattering until he started speaking.

“You really don’t remember?”

“You don’t remember?”

Jack retreated back to initial thought process. “Kyle! Where’s Kyle?!”

Lennox didn’t even react to his outburst, instead taking another step forward, laying a hand on the bed’s railing. He stayed out of Jack’s personal space, but he was still close—too close.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” the commander asked.

“I—I was… with some friends,” Jack stammered. He wanted to tremble underneath the soldier’s scrutinizing stare. Was this an interrogation? Should he confess? “My f-friend, Kyle, was taking me home. Please, is he okay?”

“I don’t know, the Autobots only found you when they brought you here.” The Autobots? They took him? From where? At his questioning stare, Lennox added, “Your mother called them.”

“Why?”

A pause. Then, “You hurt her.”

Jack didn’t hear what the man said. It only came as muted garble, his mind not even processing it.
Because it was too absurd, too unfathomable. Impossible. Mom was— Finally he digested the words, and the flurry of emotions that filled him was too much for him to take.

“What?!” Jack screamed. “Are you fragging kidding—I would never—” Then his mind finally registered the full meaning of the man’s words. Mom was hurt. “Is-is she okay? What happened to her?”

“You really don’t know?”

“Know what?!”

Jack flinched as suddenly Lennox swooped over him. The soldier’s thick arms were on either side of him, and his broad frame loomed over him, his nose only a few inches from the boy’s.

“You attacked her, Jack,” the lieutenant colonel growled, lowly, each word sinking into the poor teen’s heart. Then the man kept going. “You attacked Fowler, you attacked me. You tried to kill Seymour Simmons. You tried to kill Arcee.”

What? Jack’s mind retreated again, trying to make sense of Lennox’s impossible words.

“No,” the boy could only refuse, but it was weak, coming out only a breath. He shook his head, eyes wide. “Nonono.” This was a dream. This was all a bad dream. “That’s not true! That’s not true! I couldn’t do that!” The teenager didn’t realize tears were springing from his eyes. “Y-you’re lying!”

“Why would I lie about that?”

Jack fumbled for words, but no coherent thought came. Only— “Fuck you!” Lennox only lazily blinked at the vicious spat. “I’m—I’m not some monster!”

The lieutenant colonel closed his eyes and sighed through his nose. “That’s all I needed to know.”

He straightened, stepping back from Jack. “…It really wasn’t you.”

Jack’s systems were in overdrive. “What are you talking about?!”

“We found dark energon infused with your blood, Jack.”

The single sentence, spoken in a flat, low tone, made the teenager freeze. He felt a chill that seeped to his bones and into his core. His was mind was slow to translate the noise that touched his ears. And even then, he didn’t believe it.

No. No, that was impossible— He never—

*Jack gagged as suddenly Megatron’s bloody claws were in his mouth, scraping against the back of his throat. A toxic, metallic taste covered Jack’s tongue.*

*The human jerked his head away, trying to get away from the noxious flavor.*

*Jack spat out the violet essence, but the taste still lingered. His entire mouth burned. His throat constricted. His body trembled. Suddenly something hard wrapped around his chin.*

“What are you talking about?!”

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The single sentence, spoken in a flat, low tone, made the teenager freeze. He felt a chill that seeped to his bones and into his core. His was mind was slow to translate the noise that touched his ears. And even then, he didn’t believe it.

No. No, that was impossible— He never—

*Jack gagged as suddenly Megatron’s bloody claws were in his mouth, scraping against the back of his throat. A toxic, metallic taste covered Jack’s tongue.*

*The human jerked his head away, trying to get away from the noxious flavor.*

*Jack spat out the violet essence, but the taste still lingered. His entire mouth burned. His throat constricted. His body trembled. Suddenly something hard wrapped around his chin.*

“Look at me,” Megatron commanded.

“S-stop!” Jack pleaded, his voice cracking in his panicked state.

*His protest was futile as the warlord forced a claw into his mouth, prying his jaw open and holding his head in place. Then the acidic taste returned, the burning sensation spreading to his throat.*
Jack groaned. Megatron laughed. The boy flailed, desperately, but the stronger being had him effectively pinned. The Decepticon’s knees were on his arms and pushing him off felt bench-pressing a mountain.

The human could feel the poisonous heat travel down his throat, into his stomach. It spread to his chest, his limbs, his head.

A headache erupted in Jack’s head, like something was trying to split his skull apart. He groaned, gritting his teeth together so hard they almost cracked. His head fell back, only for more images to flash across his eyes.

Suddenly something cold pressed against his lips. He tried to flinch away, only for something to press against the back of his head, tangling in his black hair.

“Drink, my pet,” Megatron ordered, in a sickly soft tone.

Liquid forced its way into his mouth. Jack gagged at the toxic flavor. He tried to spit it out, only for his body to instinctively swallow.

Jack didn’t know he was shivering, madly. He drank it. He drank dark energon. Unicron’s blood, Megatron’s blood, was in him.

“Jack, you need to calm down,” Lennox ordered.

The army brat only heard muffled garble, not hearing him. He didn’t know his shoulders were heaving, and the monitors beeps were getting faster and louder. Everything was hot—so hot. Suddenly Jack saw movement in the corner of his eye, and he screamed.

A tall, silver figure stood over him. Red optics glowed maliciously like a demon’s, and lips pulled back to reveal sharp fangs in a devilish smile.

*Tell them, Jack. Tell them you are mine.*

The darkness around Jack’s vision closed in, and he fell into its crushing depths.

________________________________________________________________________

Lennox’s heart jumped to his throat when the kid’s eyes rolled up into his head.

“I need a medic!” he screamed at the top of his lungs, rushing back over to the boy.

He didn’t need to check a pulse to know Jack’s heart was going crazy—the warning, high-pitched shrills of the monitor filled the air. Instead, the lieutenant colonel shook the boy’s shoulder, trying to rouse him, but his head only lolled to the side. A team of doctors and nurses sprung in the room, summoned by all the commotion.

“What’s going on?!” the head doctor cried, eyes going wide.

“He hyperventilated,” Lennox answered. “He passed out.”

“He’s about to go into cardiac arrest!” a nurse wailed, the only one reading the numbers on the monitors.

Lennox was shoved out of the way as the medical staff swarmed upon the boy. They rapidly spat medical jargon he couldn’t understand at each other as they tried to calm down his racing heart. The
lieutenant colonel, helpless, only ran his hand through his hair, jaw clenched tight.

Fowler walked in the already crowded room, a wide, white bandage over his muddled cheek. It took him three seconds to process the hectic scene in front of him. Then he settled his glare on Lennox.

“What did you do?” Fowler snarled, marching over to the fellow ex-Ranger.

Lennox recoiled from his advance. “I… I told him.”

The agent’s eyes filled with fury. “Not—”

“No. Just about the dark energon.”

“And you thought that was a good idea?”

“He needed to know!” Lennox defended himself. “He didn’t even remember what happened!”

“Told him that, too?” Fowler grounded out, accusing.

“I had to make sure if he was conscious or not.”

Now the government agent was pulling at his hair. “Damnit, Lennox! This isn’t some terrorist at Guantanamo! Jack’s a kid!”

“A kid that infiltrated and stole from the Pentagon, gave trade secrets, and almost killed us!”

Fowler rolled his eyes. Not caring about who had more superiority at the moment, the man snatched his friend’s elbow and dragged him across the room. He yanked the soldier out into the hallway, out of the way of the frantic medical team. He slammed the door shut and settled a glare on Lennox.

“If what the ‘Bots say is true, that Megatron is messing with voodoo, then we both know Jack wasn’t conscious of those decisions,” Fowler explained hastily and harshly.

Lennox didn’t want to hold Jack at fault. He seemed a good kid, from what he could tell. He was Darby’s son, after all. But what the Autobots were proposing…

“Fowler, you’re telling me the kid was brainwashed,” the lieutenant colonel said. “That’s not possible—”

“Three years ago, we didn’t know they were possible.”

The soldier clipped his mouth shut. Three years ago, his biggest concern were snipers, road side bombs, and ambushes. He never expected for a helicopter—a helicopter that should have been shot down and destroyed—to land at the base. He certainly never expected it to transform into a vicious robot, decimating the US military forces, effortlessly. Lennox heard the screams of three hundred dying soldiers every time he closed his eyes.

“Then what do you suggest we do?” the man demanded as he let his friend guide him out of the medical wing.

If Jack was truly being controlled, then he was a threat, whether he was conscious or not. They couldn’t lock up a teenager for something he couldn’t help, but if Galloway found out… The President’s security advisor would have a field day.

“Ratchet says the only way to help him is to expel it,” Fowler answered, both of them know what “it” was. “But it’s risky.” At Lennox’s questioning stare, he explained, “The Doc says exposing pure
energon to Jack could counteract the dark energon.”

“That much energon could *kill* him,” Lennox argued.

Fowler didn’t deny it, nodding solemnly. “The other drawback is that dark energon is corrosive. It could reject the treatment.”

“So it won’t work?”

“It’s a fifty-fifty shot.”

Lennox’s stomach churned, not liking those odds. Not when a *teenager’s* life was at stake, when the boy hadn’t even *lived*. He folded his arms over his chest.

“There’s really nothing else we can do?” he asked.

“Simmons had a clever idea, but… we don’t know if it will work, either,” Fowler admitted.

“What is it?”

“We can put him on dialysis. It filters through the blood and we can use it to remove the dark energon.”

Lennox was familiar with the procedure, when he took his own mother to the hospital after her kidneys had failed, to remove the built-up of waste. However, the man caught on to how Fowler’s pointedly ended his sentence.

“But…?” Lennox pressed.

Fowler sighed through his nose. “Ratchet says the dark energon has infected Jack’s nervous system. The damage would be permanent. The dialysis won’t be able to undo that.”

“So we’re screwed either way,” Lennox digested, balling his hands into fists.

The agent’s shoulders slumped in defeat, but tried to keep his voice level, “We can try.”

The lieutenant colonel shook his head and ran his hand through his hair, sighing. He knew this entire nightmare was all over their heads, beyond their medical capability, even Ratchet. But Fowler was right. Not only Jack’s life, but others’ were at stake. They had to *try*.

“But him on the dialysis, see what it does,” Lennox decided, heavily. He rather try the nonfatal treatment rather than take the gamble. He gambled enough on the battlefield.

“His mother said that, too,” Fowler nodded.

Instantly the ex-Ranger snapped his gaze around. “*You told* her?”

“June’s the kid’s mother, she deserves to know. Besides, he’s sixteen. By law we have to get parental consent.” Lennox rolled his eyes, which turned into a flinch when Fowler added, “She also requested to be transported here.”

“Absolutely not!”

He had enough unauthorized civilians on his base as it was! At least he could defend that the kids and Simmons were under his protection. Inviting a woman to a classified location just because she *wanted* to? Lennox wasn’t willing to break protocol like that.
“I told her that,” Fowler replied. “But she’s a stubborn woman. It’s not the worst thing in the world, Lennox. Her husband was a Ranger, she knows how to keep a secret.”

The man guessed he couldn’t blame the poor woman. He had seen his wife, Sarah, would turn from a gentle, kind girl to a vicious mother bear when it came to their Annabelle. Lennox himself would go to Hell and back for his only daughter. He imagined it was the same for June and her only son. Lennox shut his eyes tight. Johnathan would want his family together, safe. The lieutenant colonel could always relocate Jack to a non-classified location, but considering it was a more sensitive situation…

“That does not make her military,” Lennox retorted, coming to a decision. Seeing his friend’s defeated look, he added, “But I’ll consider it.”

“Is this the kid?”

The voice was a whisper against Jack’s ear. It was muffled and faint, like it was coming through a wall.

“Yeah.”

The teenager’s eyelids were heavy. He willed to open them, but the darkness remained.

“Doesn’t look that special.”

His limbs remained cemented, unmoving.

“Boss wants us to take him in.”

Jack heard dull thuds, on either side of him. Clanking of metal.

“Why?”

A harsh beep, loud enough it assaulted the army brat’s hearing. It cut off before it could be a warning.

“Apparently he’s hangs out with the robots.”

Suddenly a touch on his skin, then and another and another.

“How does a high schooler work with military weapons?”

The teenager hissed as there was a sting of pain, of something sharp and cold being ripped from his vein.

“I don’t know, maybe he’s smarter than he looks. Come on, help me wheel him out of here.”

Jack felt the world shift, even though he wasn’t moving. He couldn’t move.

“Is the transport ready?”

Suddenly a harsh light assaulted Jack’s eyes, burning through the thin membrane of his eyelids. He winced, but it didn’t go away.
“Yes. We should be at the camp in a few hours.”

Jack felt the darkness cloak over him, trapped in its grasp. He couldn’t escape, but he couldn’t sink into it, either. Suddenly wave of solid blackness washed over him, something strong pressing against his consciousness. Powerful, dominating, possessive. Jack tried to press back, wanting to escape, to disappear.

He murmured, hoping a prayer would summon what he wanted the most.

“M-Megatron…”

Now Simmons had heard it all. A teenaged kid filled to the brim with *energon*, which turned him into some crazy-eyed ninja street fighter. The government agent didn’t really believe that he was being “controlled” like the NBEs were squawking about. A blood transfusion couldn’t allow a being to manipulate another, and *energon* showed no evidence of showing that capability. It was an energy source, nothing more.

The dozens of the scientists that had come into contact with it, trying to harness its capabilities, were lucid. Darby looked perfectly lucid, even when he pulled that gun. It was more likely the *energon* muddled his ability to judge, like what alcohol or drugs did. The substance was known to interfere with the nervous system, after all.

Simmons didn’t get how the NBEs’ master plan to infect the kid with *more* *energon* would work. If anything, it would just give him a heart attack. If dark *energon* was in his bloodstream, it was a much simpler and safer solution just to remove it. It worked for ruined kidneys, it would work on a teenager ruined with *energon*.

Everyone would be happy. Well, *almost* everyone.

Simmons strutted through the medical wing. As there hadn’t been any action lately, the soldiers confined in the safety of the base, the hospital was almost barren. Just a few souls suffering from misfortunate accidents or a bad stomach ache. Doctors lingered languidly in the halls, rather than the frantic bustle of most hospitals. Not even the nurses seemed to be in a hurry.

The Sector Seven agent even saw one meddling on his phone, obviously texting. However, once the young man noticed Simmons’s approach, he hastily flipped it shut and stuffed it in the empty pockets of his bright-colored scrubs. He greeted the guest with a warm smile, even though he was caught a red-handed. Simmons casually paused beside him, careful not to invade his personal space.

“Excuse me, young man,” he hailed politely, friendly. “Do you know where I can find Jackson Darby?”

The nurse’s answer was quick and efficient as always.

“He’s in isolation right now,” the man answered.

Simmons cocked an eyebrow. “Is there some sort of infection?”

“No. He… was arrested for… misconduct. We had to set him aside from the other patients so he wouldn’t be a threat.”

“Detained.”

“Pardon?”
“Darby was detained. You arrest someone if their going to jail. Kid wasn’t charged with anything.”

The nurse blinked, but slowly nodded. “Right. My bad, slip of the tongue.”

The spy nodded, understanding he found the right man. “Good, I can tell Lennox I got his man.”

Another blink. Damn, this guy was slow. “Excuse me?”

“You would think a nurse like you would know patient confidentiality.” The agent took a step forward; the so-called nurse took a step back. “I did not ask you for Darby’s story. I asked you where he was. And you don’t put a criminal in the isolation ward.”

Simmons tried not to cackle at the man’s expression as he kept advancing. Red in the face, sweat on his brow, muscles tense. He fumbled for an excuse, but none came. Finally the Sector Seven agent paused, tired of the hunt.

“So you want to tell me you’re really working for?” he demanded.

The mole bolted. Simmons rolled his eyes.

The secret agent didn’t bother running after the escapee. Sure enough, the “nurse” sprinted ten paces before a thick, solid arm shot out, colliding right in the man’s jugular. There was a choking sound as his neck snapped backwards and his legs flew into the air. He wheezed as his back hit the hard tile of the floor, the back of his head slamming against the unforgiving surface.

Lennox stood over him, his arms crossed and looking down at his catch. Although his stern face was pulled in an inscrutable frown, his brown eyes blazed with disdain and fury.

“Really?” Simmons drawled as he approached the pair, hands casually in the pockets of his coat. “Rabbiting in a military base in the middle of the ocean? You, sir, are a rank amateur.”

“And a traitor,” Lennox growled, not bothering to help the poor man to his feet as he shifted his weight to his elbows.

Seeing the two men looming over him, he wisely stayed down.

“W-what are you talking about?” he stammered. He was still playing dumb. How cute. “I didn’t do anything!”

“Then why were you running?” Simmons retorted. “Anthony, right? Or is it James Philips, from tech? Or Private First Class Eric Dean?”

The man’s eyes got wider and wider at each name. He opened his mouth to protest, but no sound came out, so he just looked like a fish gasping for air. Eventually Simmons grew tired of waiting for a response.

“But let me guess—none of those are real name, huh?” the Sector Seven agent drawled.

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about…” the man tried again, even though he went a shade paler.

“Oh, drop the act. You’re not getting any Oscars.” Simmons decided to have a pity on the man by squatting to his level, focusing his hard gaze on his prisoner. “We know about the career changes—we found your face in four out of the five branches of the United States Armed Forces. Including in the last couple years, you showed up in three different bases designated to NEST. You’re a real
chameleon, aren’t you?”

“Th-that’s insane!” the prisoner spat, shaking his head as he looked between his interrogators. “You’re accusing me because of my face? Just walk outside! There’s a hundred guys that look like me.”

He wasn’t wrong. Broad shouldered, buzzcut hair, stern features. Features of a soldier, not a doctor. Simmons was quite enjoying watching the idiot dig his own grave.

“What’s insane,” Lennox cut in, “is someone that condones mass-murder of innocents.”

“What the f—”

Apparently the lieutenant colonel was out of patience. In a blink of an eye, the soldier lunged like a lion attacking a downed gazelle. The prisoner yelped as fists closed around his shirt and he was hauled to his feet. Before the man could properly right himself, Lennox slammed into the nearest walls. He groaned as the commander expertly settled his weight against him, effectively pinning him to the wall.

“You’re a traitor,” Lennox spat, “and a terrorist.”

“Now you’ve made him angry,” Simmons commented dryly. He stood back from the raging soldier, but kept his hands tucked in his pockets, making no sign of intervening.

“I love my country!” the man spat, but it was too harsh to be sincere. “You don’t know any—hey!”

Whatever he was saying cut off as a protest as Lennox reached in the man’s pocket without his permission. Ignoring his surprised denials, the soldier fished out the cell phone and tossed it to Simmons. The agent caught it easily and did not need to be told to flip it open. He ignored the prisoner’s angered rants as he went through the messages.

Simmons frowned in disappointment when he looked through the conversations. Or rather, lack of them. The idiot was smart enough to delete his texts. Lennox glowered at the agent’s somber look.

“Nothing?” he gasped.

“See! I told you—you got the wrong guy!” the prisoner snapped, even daring to push against his captor. Despite they were almost the same size, Lennox was stronger, able to shove him back to the wall easily.

Simmons ignored the quarrel as he continued to skim through the phone.

“You know… I had a friend of mine, a little absent-minded,” he mused, not looking up to meet both men’s confused glances. “Always forgot flight information—he missed a plane twice. So he started taking pictures of his tickets, just to remind him of everything.” He glanced up with a victorious, only to keep the puzzled, but terrified look of the mole. “Let’s see if you’re as stupid.”

Simmons skimmed through the pictures. Like the texts, there were only a handful, but they were damning. He smiled.

“Got it,” he announced triumphantly. “Miami, Florida, and I even have a date.”

Lennox immediately recognized it. His grip tightened on his prisoner.

“The same time and place as the arms deal bust,” he realized.
“Sponsored by MECH,” Simmons finished.

By now the mole realized his fate had been doomed. His eyes went wide horror and his breaths increased rapidly. The Sector Seven agent still bothered to rub it in.

“So, any other half-ass excuses you want to entertain us with?” he asked, mocking.

The terrified look suddenly turned menacing. The MECH spy narrowed his eyes to slits in a furious glare, lips even pulled back in a snarl. His voice was nothing more than a savage growl.

“Silas is going to kill every last one of—”

Lennox sent a right hook into the prisoner’s temple, the slap of impact audible in the silence of the secluded hallway. The spy grunted as the breath was knocked out of him. Simmons casually stepped out of the way as he collapsed on the floor, unconscious.

Lennox’s look was feral. Simmons was afraid he was going to shoot the mole right then and there. The agent caught on quickly that the soldier was a thoroughbred patriot—so it was only natural he was less than pleased knowing one of his men was a traitor. However, Simmons’s concern was for naught as the lieutenant dropped to a knee, looming above the downed mole, pulling out a pair of handcuffs.

“Worth it?” Simmons asked.

“A little satisfying,” Lennox shrugged, clicking the cuffs into place. “At least the leak’s taken care of.”

“He went wherever MECH needed him. Whatever position bled the most information he could sell back to his buddies.”

A low-ranking soldier to learn NEST’s military strategies and weapons. A technician to learn their technology, and most likely, to glean information on the Autobots. Apparently he had gotten bored with the task, and he switched to a much more subtle role. Hard to suspect someone that saved lives.

Still, it baffled Simmons. The entire point of planting a double agent was to learn as much of your enemy as possible. A nurse in the local medical building offered no additional intel. Medical staff weren’t even given clearance for half of the base—and were especially banned from any contact from the Autobots. The closest they came to the NBEs were treating energon burns and torn flesh after a nasty fire fight against ‘Cons. Other than that, there was nothing MECH could gain.

Only thing here was alien-magnet-b—

Simmons’s eyes went wide as his heart stopped. Without a word, he spun on his heels and sprinted down the hallway. He didn’t even care that he would feel it later, ignoring Lennox’s startled shout, as he twisted around the corner. He almost knocked over a pair of doctors, but didn’t apologize as he barged his way through.

It took him longer than he liked to reach the room. He skidded to a halt, an action less graceful than his younger days. He threw the door open.

Only to realize he was too late.

Jack Darby was gone.
Chapter Notes

I rewrote this chapter twice. I’m still not happy with it. I blame finals.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The first thing Jack felt was pain. It started in the back of his skull, pulsating throughout his head to become a steady throb behind his eyes. The discomfort even extended to his neck, traveling down his spine and leaving every muscle sore.

Jack groaned.

He slowly, tentatively, opened his eyes, only to squint when a harsh light assaulted his vision. He waited a couple moments to try again, allowing his eyes to adjust to the glaring fluorescent light above him. That was doing nothing to help his migraine.

Jack immediately realized something was wrong. This wasn’t home. With a blurry vision, he scanned his surroundings to see unfamiliar figures. He was in a long, narrow room with white-washed walls. Rows of small, metal cots filled the space, all empty and untouched. Where was he? What happened? Everything was so fuzzy...

He only remembered growls in his ear, encouraging him, mocking him. Shouts, yelling, accusing. Then scheming whispers. The pain flared and he groaned again, placing a shaky hand on his brow.

He wanted to go back to sleep. To escape and never—

"The tranquilizers we gave you should be wearing off by now."

Jack started at the voice—a cold, authoritative tone that sent unnerving chills down his spine. One he instantly recognized.

No, it couldn’t be… It—it was just another nightmare...

The army brat glanced over, and his blood turned to ice at the figure that greeted him. Broad-shouldered, thick arms, sturdy, armored chest. Cropped white hair, cold black eyes, and strong features marred by pale and disfigured battle scars. Even sitting down, Jack knew the man was a full head taller than him and was twice as broad.

Silas.

The monster that had tormenting the Autobots—tormenting him—for months, just so he could have a new class of weapons for his “new world order.” He tried to steal nuclear weaponry to allow the murder of possibly hundreds, thousands, of innocents lives. The madman had not only tried to kill Jack, he had tried to kill his mother, tried to kill his best friend. Rip Arcee apart like she was some sort of science experiment.

No, this couldn’t be real. The leader of MECH sat on a pitiful cot across from him, elbows on his knees and chin on his knuckles, in an almost bored expression.
“What the f—” Jack gasped, automatically shooting up into a sitting position.

Only to pain to flare across his skull. The boy yelped and his hand instinctively flew up to his brow, cradling it. He tried to take a breath, only to let out a shuddering sigh as his entire body shivered. What… what was wrong with him?

“I apologize,” Silas’s drawl came, but it did not sound sincere. “Doc said the drugs would have side-effects.”

“D-Drugs?” Jack repeated.

“It was very convenient you showed up at NEST. I was afraid I would have to drag you out of Jasper.”

“What… are you talking about?”

Silas only scoffed. “Anthony said you be out of it.”

Jack opened his mouth to retort, only for the muscles of his body to throb in agony with another burst of quivers. The teenager collapsed back in his original position. He realized he was on one of the cots, with a rough, thin blanket thrown over him.

The teenager tried to piece together Silas’s riddles. What happened? He squinted, trying to piece together his broken mind. Then he started. He… remembered…

He was at the party, with Kyle. He got into a fight with Vince, catching his arm when the bully try to sucker punch him. He landed several brutal blows, hearing the crack of a broken nose, before throwing the insect away. Kyle took him home, but he was drunk. He saw Megatron, in his home, mocking him.

Then…

Jack’s shivering increased violently. He remembered Mom… throwing her to the ground, taking her car. He didn’t know where he was going, that he just wanted to get away. Only for the Autobots to deny him of that. Oh, God, Arcee…

He… tried to kill her.

That’s why Lennox had to cuff him in the medical wing. Not only to prevent the out-of-control teenager from hurting others but from hurting himself. Because there was dark energon in his bloodstream, in his body. All due to the fact he couldn’t fight against Megatron.

Just like he couldn’t fight against Silas now.

“W-What do y-you want?” Jack hissed, trying to sound as threatening as possible, but with his shaky voice, it failed miserably.

“That’s a rather broad question, don’t you think?” Silas mocked.

The teenager snarled and corrected himself, “Why am I here?”

“A few weeks ago, I got a call from an old friend of my mine,” Silas drawled, standing from the cot. He paced around Jack’s like a predator, the military brat’s glare never wavering. “Told me they caught a pair of kids sneaking around the Pentagon. And one of them looked like a lot like you.”

Jack couldn’t help but wince at the accusation. Even he knew about that? A part of him knew it
wasn’t a surprise. Fowler had said that Silas was ex-military, so it wasn’t far-fetched if the man had “contacts” in even the most secure locations. Even the Pentagon. The boy’s stomach twisted.

“So what if it was?” Jack snapped.

Silas gave a crooked smile that made the teen’s skin crawl. “I’m curious how a boy like you managed to do that.”

“What? So you want tips?”

“No.”

Jack moved on to the next theory, swallowing thickly, “You think I stole something.”

“I know you did. A cyber-attack on the military network the exact same time a pair of teenagers show up? Please, I’m not as stupid as SecDef.”

The MECH leader sounded confident, and the boy knew there was no point in denying it. “Even if I still had it, I wouldn’t give it to you.”

“I figured as much.”

Jack blinked at Silas’s nonchalant response. The extremist wandered to a nearby window, that merely passed as a narrow, horizontal slit near the ceiling. The man was tall enough to manage to stare out with his hands behind his back, back straight and feet shoulder-width apart. The teen narrowed his eyes to a glare.

He stared suspiciously at the terrorist’s back, but didn’t have time to question his intentions as Silas went on, “What you stole or who you sold it to is irrelevant to me—”

“I didn’t sell—”

Jack’s protest was cut off by a pointed look Silas cast him from over his shoulder. “Then why did they have you chained up?”

Jack clenched his jaw, trying to control his breathing. But Silas didn’t know. Silas couldn’t know. He glared as the extremist gave a victorious smirk and continued looking outside the faded glass.

“If you don’t care then why did you kidnap me?” Jack demanded venomously.

“Because I know how you did it.”

The teenager flinched, violently. It took him several, long moments to digest the words, each one rolling in his head several times. His blood went cold.

Silas knew.

No, that wasn’t possible. The mad couldn’t possibly know that Jack had used Decepticon technology, given to him by Megatron himself, to hack into the most secure building in the world. Not even Fowler, not even Lennox, not even the Secretary of Defense knew what he had done. Until Raf told them. But there was no way—

“I… I don’t what you’re talking about,” Jack forced out, but it came out as a weak and pitiful whimper.

“A little too late to be playing dumb, now, hmm?” Silas drawled as he turned back to his prisoner,
hands clasped behind his back.

Jack shifted, his flight instincts screaming, as he stalked closer. However, each movement sent a wave of pain to course through his muscles and his head tilted several times without his permission. The way he was now, the teenager realized it would be a miracle if he could make it a step. Instead, he glared at Silas as the extremist pulled out a device from his pocket.

It looked like a thin screen, slightly larger than the man’s hand, almost like an iPhone. Jack instinctively leaned away as his captor settled next to his cot, but his attention was not on his prisoner. Silas meddled with the device, giving the screen a couple taps before he turned it around, lowering so Jack could see.

The teenager narrowed his eyes at the man before shifting his attention to the screen, just as high-pitched, ghost-like sounds erupted from it. It was a series of metallic noises, beeps, and whirrs, almost like—

Jack’s heart stopped with a gasp.

*Cybertronian.*

“This is the signal that penetrated the Pentagon’s firewalls two weeks ago,” Silas explained, his tone like he was telling a child why the sky was blue. “The *same* one that had infiltrated the network three years ago.” A wicked sneer twisted the terrorist’s face. “During an attack on a US Army base in Qatar.”

It hurt when Jack swallowed. His throat felt dry and raw. He tried make his voice sound stronger, but he failed. “Crazy coincidence, huh?”

Silas scowled, obviously not amused. “Because it *isn’t.*” He ducked the device back in the pockets of his armor. “So, your robot friends are hacking the government. Does NEST know about this?”

Jack kept his mouth sealed shut. Whatever twisted conclusion the MECH leader had come to, he wasn’t going to confirm it. No, the Autobots would never attack the humans, physical or technological. Yes, NEST knew it was the Decepticons, but was Jack that did it.

“Of course they do,” Silas responded to the teen’s silence. “It was why they arrested you and locked up their science projects.”

“No!” Jack protested. “That’s not—”

He cut himself off, realizing his horrible mistake. His captor merely cocked a curious eyebrow. The teen felt his blood turn to ice. Silas was right. He *had* to be locked away—he was a danger. But not the Autobots, not when—

Jack shut his eyes when the headache flared. He swallowed, hard, trying to ignore the pain as he glared back up at his tormentor.

“I did it,” he forced out, his voice stone. “Just me.”

He was surprised when Silas humored him.

“Maybe,” the MECH leader admitted, having Jack blink at his nonchalance. “Maybe you didn’t bring the robots along on your little jaunt. But you *did* use their technology.”

With that, the extremist stalked away, leaving the army brat more confused than when he first woke
up. He realized that Silas still hadn’t answered single one of his questions. If the madman knew he infiltrated the military network, and knew how he did it, and did not care why or what he did, then why was Jack here? What did the psychopath want from him this time?!

“You didn’t answer my question, Silas,” the teenager spat. “What do you want from me?”

“From you? Nothing,” the terrorist replied, turning back to face him, arms folded. “You’re just the unaccounted variable in battle. A means to an end.”

“What the hell are you talking ab—” Jack realized. He felt the ice in his veins spread to his very bones, his core. He felt the horror sink into his stomach like lead. “…You’re after the Autobots.”

Silas gave a wicked sneer. His eyes filled with a dark, lustful gleam.

“Twenty seconds,” he said. “It took twenty seconds for that signal to cripple the entire network. Just imagine… That kind of capability in human kind’s grasp…”

“That kind of technology doesn’t belong to humans,” Jack hissed.

He didn’t think about how easy it came out. For the first times in weeks, the voices that had been warring in his heart agreed on something. The one thing Megatron and Optimus Prime, who had being battling each other for millions of years, agreed on, and the human boy could not argue.

Humans had no right to control Transformers.

“But it already does,” Silas retorted. “Hoarded by the American government. Who’s to say they haven’t already used it on their enemies? Third world countries? Who’s to say that they will use it?”

Jack gritted his teeth in rage. Suddenly everything he had learned came rushing back through the haze of his mind.

“If you really did your homework, you would know that the treaty doesn’t allow the trade of weaponry,” the boy pointed out. “The Autobots would never share that kind of technology.”

“Oh, but they have no problem doing a few favors for the U.S. government.” Jack opened his mouth to argue, but his captor went on, harshly, before he could say a word. “Wake up, boy. The Autobots, you call them? They’re living weapons. You really think the military’s going to pass that up? They’ll milk every bullet from those robots until every country in the world is groveling at its feet.”

The army brat was shaking his head in denial. No, that was Silas’s ambition—not—

“If you really think the government agreed to a ‘peace’ treaty, you’re as blind as the rest of the media,” the extremist spat. “All they do is lie. To the people, to their allies, to their own military, to Staff Sergeant Johnathan Darby.”

It was a name Jack could recognize anywhere, anytime, like it was the back of his hand. More so, as it was forever branded on his wounded heart. But to hear from the MECH leader’s lips, so harshly, so clearly, it took him several long seconds to translate it. The boy recoiled so violently that the back of his head slammed against the wall.

“How do you know that name?” he snarled.

The scowl on Silas’s face turned into a wide, cruel smile. “I told you. I know things about you that you don’t even know.”
“What—”

Jack didn’t have time to finish his demand as the militia leader closed the distance between them in a blink of an eye. The teenager hissed as a strong, unrelenting grip captured his chin, forcing his gaze to tilt up to meet his captor’s.

“You think your father died as a hero, don’t you?” Silas hissed.

Jack glared and growled savagely, “My father is a hero—”

“They threw him out like a piece of trash.” The army brat winced as his head was raised higher, and the MECH leader swooped lower, so their locked gazes were only an inch apart. Silas dropped his voice to a venomous hiss. “Just like888 me. Just like they’ll forget about you, army brat.”

“Autobots, stand down.”

“Sh-shut up!”

Jack’s shrill scream ended in a wail as Silas threw him back, his head once again striking the concrete wall behind him. White flashed across his vision. It took several long moments for his blurry vision to focus on the extremist’s broad, controlled form.

“Think about it, Jack,” Silas continued, saying his name in hiss. “A world where robots fight for us, instead of puppets wasted on the battlefield. Think about many lives it would save. What happened to your family would never happen again.”

The teenager shook his head. He tried to ignored the twisting of his heart and push away Dad’s mischievous, warm smile. “Governments would just use Cybertronian technology to destroy everything.”

“Then it would be mutually assured destruction. There would be peace.”

Peace?! How did everyone in a world possess the most deadly weaponry in the galaxy—weaponry that was not theirs—bring peace? The boy shivered, and he had a strong feeling it wasn’t because of the side-effects of the tranquilizers. The capability to bring entire militaries—entire nations—to their knees, in just a matter of seconds. It would be worse than war. It was be chaos. Destructive, utter chaos.

“You’re… insane,” Jack hissed. He knew that didn’t begin to describe it.

Jack glanced up, only to meet that menacing look. No, it wasn’t bloodlust. It was something worse. A dangerous, evil gleam, with a desire to destroy a world that had wronged him. To destroy anything in his way. Was this even a human? Or was this another hallucination? Was this Megatron, in a skin of flesh?

“MECH will lead to a new age in human history,” Silas countered. “Where technology and metal rules, and flesh and skin are replaced. If a brat like you can control those machines—”

Jack’s chest filled with rage at the word choice. The Transformers weren’t machines, they weren’t robots, they weren’t tools. Besides, Cybertronians couldn’t be controlled. He had learned that the first day he met Arcee. The motorcycle was temperamental, to say the least. Besides—

“Trust me, if I could ‘control’ them, I wouldn’t be here!” the teenager spat.

“Nevertheless, no doubt NEST will send them to come looking for you,” Silas replied. “Or, the very
least, negotiate for your release. And either way, I’ll get exactly what I want.”

“That’s not going to happen.” Jack couldn’t keep the bitterness from his voice. “They don’t care about me.”

The MECH leader only gave dark chuckle under his breath.

“Oh, we’ll see about that,” the madman purred, turning on his heel, headed towards the door. He opened it, revealing a pair of armored, masked, faceless soldiers on the other side, each carrying a semi-automatic weapon. Silas glanced over his shoulder one last time, only to see Jack’s dark, furious gaze. “Catch you later, brat.”

Naturally Jack didn’t sleep after Silas left. He felt adrenaline slowly dripped into his veins, trying to fight off the tranquilizers. His mind was stuff fuzzy, the same thoughts turning in his head over and over. Particularly his conversation with Silas.

Jack was bait. Like a hunk of meat left in the woods for hunters to shoot down bears. And that bear was the Autobots. It was always about them, wasn’t it? And the teenager was just caught in the crossfire.

Jack doubted the Autobots would rush to save him. They had left him at the mercy of Megatron, and they had left him on his own. Did they even know where he was? How could they possibly find him? Silas said the government would negotiate for his release. The American military didn’t negotiate with terrorists.

The army brat tried to identify his surroundings. He was in a barracks, he realized that much. There were up to a dozen cots in a long, narrow room, with very little furnishing. It looked like Jack was alone. How nice of Silas, to give an entire barracks to him.

There the handful of windows in the room, but they were barred and too small the teenager crawl through. Looking out, he determined the room was mostly underground. Jack only saw a cluster of run-down buildings, occasionally a movement of combat boots going by. There was thick, lush foliage of a forest beyond.

Jack couldn’t distinguish anything more than that, other than coming to the conclusion he was in some sort of base of operations. By his guess, far away from civilization. He cursed.

He had to find a way out of here. There was no guarantee that Silas would free him. In fact, Jack highly doubted it. The madman had tried to kill him a plenty of times before. There was nothing stopping him from executing the teenager once he got what he wanted. But the military brat he had to walk first, in order to do that.

It was slow going. Jack swung his legs over the side of the cot, pressing the bare soles of his feet to the floor. With a sigh, he tried to push himself off. Only when he straightened, his legs trembled and he fell back down on the cot. His legs felt like jelly, unable to hold his weight. What was wrong with him?

“We found dark energon infused with your blood, Jack.”

No, it just couldn’t be true. Exposure to dark energon would have killed him. Then he remembered.

It almost did kill him. His body had rejected it.
“You had a fever of 105. Another degree would have been death. Your proteins were denaturing—you don’t even want to know how low your albumin and globulin levels were.”

It was a foreign substance, after all, and his body had naturally tried to expel it. It failed, though. Lennox said it was infused. So not just in his blood. It was part of his blood, the very cell itself. It explained why his immune system no longer fight the alien material, not without fighting itself. Like a wicked form of HIV.

Jack remembered what Megatron had done with the vile substance. He had infused it with the dead of Cybertron, desecrating the rest of both Autobots and Decepticons, Not only did the dark energon give rise to the dead. Megatron had used it to control his newfound army. His very will infused in their bodies.

If it was part of him…

Jack shut his eyes. Sure enough, the ruined skyscrapers of Cybertron greeted him.

“That’s impossible. A Cybertronian’s processor is too complex for such a—a human could never—

Was it the patch that allowed him to see Megatron’s memories? Or was it the tainted blood in them both? Jack’s heart quickened. If he could share the titan’s memories… did that mean… Even now, the teenager could feel the bitter resentment in his chest. Was it his? Or was Megatron’s?

Oh, God, what had Megatron done to him?

Jack shoved the train of thought away, but it was hard, his entire body was trembling. He swallowed thickly. He had to get out of here.

With that, the teenager tried to force himself to his feet once again. And again and again. Finally, he stood straighten, not needing a support to hold him up. His legs were shaky, but solid. With that, the teenager put one foot in front of the other. He had to concentrate on each step at a time.

He made it to the next cot. Then the next. And the next. Finally Jack found himself on the other side of the room. Then he realized he would have to get back. He winced when he saw his designated cot several rows down. Had he really walked that far?

He realized he could just plop on any of the makeshift beds, but Jack refused to give up so easily. With each step, he felt the haze of drugs ebb away, replaced by determination. He began the slow journey back to his spot. Normally it would have taken him seconds to cross the length of the barracks, but in his current state, it took him a couple minutes to reach the cot.

Jack sighed. He wasn’t going to be running anytime soon, but it was a start. Maybe if he tried to sleep some of it off— His thoughts were interrupted by the squeaking of a door opening.

“Oh, good, you’re up,” a voice came.

Jack froze.

That voice. He knew that voice. He heard it his entire life. It was one of the few, untouched constants in his life, even though he heard it few and far between. That was until he moved to Jasper, where the teen met him on almost a daily basis.

He turned around, slowly, stiffly. Even when he was greeted with the familiar figure, Jack blinked several times. Like trying to get rid of a bad dream. It had to be. There was no way. It couldn’t be him. But in the deep, dark recesses of his mind, Jack knew this was real. That the man in front of him
was real.

“...D-Debiase?” he gasped, stammering in disbelief.


DeBiase smiled, but it was too warm, too fake. He was dressed in navy blue scrubs and a white coat draped over him, the rim reaching his ankles. He looked like it was any other day at the hospital, not at a base of a twisted terrorist organization. It was juxtaposed to the faceless, masked soldier beside him, who was in full body armor.

Jack shook his head, taking a tentative step back. “W-What are you doing here?”

“I know this must be a surprise for you,” Debiase sighed, but kept his distance, catching on the boy’s distress. He frowned, and he almost looked... guilty. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to find out this way.”

“...You work for MECH.”

DeBiase, the man who Jack had known his entire life, nodded. “Yes.”

The teen shook his head, trying to will the dream to disappear. “M-Mom—”

“She doesn’t know. No one does.”

The words echoed in Jack’s head, and he realized why they were true.

“Because you lied to her,” the prisoner accused, curling his lip into a curl. “Just like you like to me.”

It was DeBiase’s turn to shake his head. “‘No, I didn’t. I couldn’t tell you. It was for your own protec...”

“Dad trusted you!”

Dad was an Army Ranger. He lived—and died—to protect and serve his country. And now one of his closest friends preached against everything he believed in. DeBiase frowned.

“I’m so sorry what happened to your father, Jack,” the doctor said, like he hadn’t already said it a thousand times. “But I told June that she couldn’t rely on him. That one day—”

“Shut up!” Jack screeched. “Don’t you dare talk about him!”

“His death hurt me, too, believe me. I saw him as—”

“I said shut up!”

Jack was recoiling now, trying to get as much distance between him and the liar that claimed to be his guardian. The soldier beside DeBiase moved, as if to collect the boy, but the physician held him back. His hard gaze never left the traumatized teenager.

“Jack, look what the government has done to you. To your mother. I know you loved him, but Johnathan was just a pawn and let himself get killed—”

“You son of a bitch!”

It wasn’t the same surge as before. But Jack felt raw fury—raw hatred—fill his veins, rushing up to
his head. He lunged forward, closing the distance between him and the bastard in a single bound. He raised his hands like they were claws, braced to rip the man apart.

Only for solid hands to snatch his shoulders. The soldier just as big as Silas, pushed himself between the boy and doctor, wrapping his arms around Jack to keep him pinned in place. The boy hissed and snarled and fought like a rabid, caged animal, but it did little to deter his captor. Suddenly pain exploded from his temple, white flashing across his eyes.

“Stop!” DeBiase’s voice came, but it was muted. The soldier suddenly vanished as he was shoved away. “We need him unharmed!” Suddenly the man’s face filled Jack’s vision. “Are you okay?”

It was then Jack became aware of the bastard’s hands on his shoulders. The teenager threw him off, reeling back.

“Get away from me!” he roared.

“Jack, please—”

Jack’s fist flew out before he could stop it, connecting with DeBiase’s jaw. Jack was surprised by his own strength, as the man was sent to the ground. The teenager felt hot satisfaction course through his veins. There was something—powerful, dark—pressing against his mind.

Suddenly thick, unrelenting arms were around his shoulders. Jack snarled, flailing against the soldier, but his strikes only hit metal armor. Suddenly his back was pinned to the bed. The guard was leaning nearly all his weight on his chest. Wretched insect!

“Get off me!” Jack hissed, writhing under his captor’s grip, trying to leave, to escape. “Let me go! Let me go!”

“Keep him down so I can sedate him!” DeBiase snapped over his wails.

The army brat pushed harder, more violently, but the soldier just readjusted his weight. He gasped as all the air was squeezed from his lungs. Suddenly there an unrelenting grip on his other arm. He looked over to see DeBiase hovering over him, syringe filled with clear liquid in hand.

“No!” Jack protested, flailing, but it was pointless.

He let out a sob as the needle buried in his vein and the vial drained. There was a soothing hush and a comforting stroke on his arm, but it was too fake.

The world went black.

The Autobots took the news as well as Lennox expected them to. Fowler had warned him. Simmons had even told him not to tell the NBEs. But the lieutenant colonel realized he had no choice. They would find out, sooner or later. Miko and Rafael were already demanding to see their friend. Lennox braced himself. He made the mistake of doing it when all ten of the Autobots were present.

The man had to cover his ears for a solid five minutes. Metallic, high-pitched screams of fury filled the air, along with the horrible sounds of metal hitting metal, advanced weapons engaging, and earth-quaking stomps. Lennox was beginning to fear the extra-terrestrials would rampage before Optimus Prime was finally able to regain control over his subordinates.
Still, they were far from calm.

Not when Jack Darby had been taken.

As commander of NEST, Lennox had seen how the Autobots were protective over their allies. They would not take a moment’s hesitation to take an attack for another, or even a human. When Bumblebee had been captured by Sector Seven, the Autobots had prepared to launch an attack. When Fowler was interrogated by the Decepticons, they had staged a rescue mission. When Jack Darby was kidnapped by Megatron, Arcee had taken on their warship all by herself.

Fowler had warned him.

When it came to the children, it was something more than tolerating or accepting the human’s presence. The Autobots saw the teenagers as part of their own. Then it wasn’t a matter of the treaty. It was a matter of Cybertronian law.

If an Autobot was harmed in any sort of way, it was a declaration of war.

When Sector Seven harmed the scout, who was under direct command of Optimus Prime, they had insulted the entire alien race. Prime told the Decepticons were their true enemy, but there would be no alliance unless the prosecutors had answered for their crimes. Realizing they were outmatched and could not afford a possible two-front war, the American government had hastily rectified their mistake.

Bumblebee and the Cybertronian weaponry was released. Sector Seven was disbanded. Seymour Simmons, the man that was the head of the operation to capture the scout was tried. Even he wasn’t prosecuted, he was banned like the rest of the members of the shadow organization.

Now MECH had taken Jack Darby, and threatened his life.

Now Autobots demanded war, but not against Decepticons. Again humans.

Lennox had made Prime see reason. Now he had to worry about the nine other trigger-happy aliens.

The voice over the phone did not help thing, either.

“T won’t agree that,” the lieutenant colonel spat, pounding his fist on the table.

“I see it rather reasonable,” the bastard’s—Silas’s—voice replied over the speaker. “I will release the boy in exchange for a robot. Don’t tell me the army sees a machine more valuable than an American life.”

“You’re asking for a civilian life in the exchange for classified weaponry.” Lennox knew the stakes were so much higher than that, but he didn’t have the time or patience to spell it out to the leader of MECH. “Even if I had that authority, I would not be surrendering an Autobot to you.”

“I would to speak to your superior, then. Someone who can get what I require.”

Lennox swallowed. Not even General Bryce or the Secretary of Defense could do that. Hell, not even the President of the United States could do that. The only entity on Earth that had any authority over the Autobots was Optimus Prime. But the Guardian Knight wouldn’t sacrifice his own warriors, especially not to a faction that had just insulted him. Trading an honorary Autobot for an actual Autobot would be counterproductive, anyway.

“What you require is impossible,” Lennox argued.
“I hate to send a poor widow another casket,” Silas replied, but his tone was venomous rather than mournful. “You seem a smart man, Colonel Lennox. I am sure you will find a way. I expect an answer within twenty-four hours.”

“That’s not enough ti—”

There was a burst of static and a click and the line went dead. Lennox cursed. Silas did not have to finish his sentence to tell of his unspoken threat. Twenty-four hours to deliver an Autobot, or Jack Darby would not be coming home alive.

The lieutenant colonel buried his face in his hands.

“Wished we shot that cocky bastard when he had the chance,” Fowler’s voice came.

The liaison sat in the chair across from him, glaring at the phone as if it was the terrorist himself.

“You know we can’t cede to his demands,” Lennox said, reluctantly lifting his head.

“And you know the Autobots are going to tear this planet apart looking for that boy,” Fowler retorted, arms crossed over his chest.

“Prime knows the human race is fractioned. He won’t act against us.”

“It doesn’t matter. If the Autobots go up against MECH, it’s not going to be a fight. A high-tech militia made of rednecks isn’t going to stand a chance against—”

“MECH is a terrorist organization. They—”

Fowler shook his head. “It doesn’t matter if we send the ‘Bots to assassinate the most wanted man in the world. You know it as much as I do.”

Lennox wished he didn’t.

“If the Autobots are responsible for a death of a human, then NEST is terminated.”

Chapter End Notes

So plot twist, not a major plot twist, but one nonetheless. I found making a static character an antagonist more interesting rather than making another faceless (literally) figure. For those who forgot who DeBiase is and had to skim through the story all over again, sorry about that.
Rough hands jolted Jack awake. The teenager snapped his eyes open, only to be greeted by white walls and a wave of disorientation. He felt a solid grip on his shoulder, shaking him from his stupor. The boy twisted sharply to confront the assailter, only to be greeted by a masked face. Then he remembered, his stomach knotting.

He was still a prisoner of MECH.

“What?” Jack slurred. The sedatives hadn’t apparently worn off, because his mind was a fog and his limbs were heavy.

“You need to eat something,” the soldier replied, his voice devoid of any emotion.

Sure enough, there was a tray of food on the cot next to him. Jack couldn’t tell exactly what it was, except a bowl of something and two slices of bread with something in between them. He had seen more appetizing meals at school. His stomach twisted.

“I’m not hungry,” the teenager moaned.

He tried to turn over to defy consciousness and his captor, but he was denied that luxury. The grip went to his wrist, almost crushing. Jack hissed as he was pulled, his arm almost yanking out of his socket, into a sitting position. There was a sting of pain, and the teenager glanced down to see a white bandage around his elbow. The same spot where DeBiase had injected the needle. His head spun, only for his thoughts to be interrupted by the man that woke him up.

“Eat,” the soldier ordered.

“…Fine.”

The tray was placed on his lap, and Jack had to force his arm to move and his mouth to open. His stomach churned with each bite, either from the drugs, the anxiety, or the dark energon. But Jack couldn’t push away or take his time, not with the impatient soldier watching him. With the visor hiding his face, the man almost appeared emotionless. Like a statue. Or a robot.

Did they ever take those things off? The teenager supposed it made sense they were careful with their masks around him. It was so Jack couldn’t identify them when he got out of here. If he got out of here. He eyed the room, noticing there were no other figures present.

“Where’s Dr. DeBiase?” he asked.

“Busy.”

“Where’s Silas?”

“Busy.”

“I’ll take it you’re the talkative type.”

Not a word. Jack decided not to push the sarcastic comments. He ate as quickly as his stomach would allow. Anything to get the guard away from him. Once every bite was gone, the man dutifully took the tray back and slipped out of the room. Jack heard it swing close with a slam and a click of a lock slipping in place.
The army brat immediately curled back up, holding his middle, trying to push down the nausea. Part of Jack wondered how in the world his life had come to this.

He was supposed to be in Washington D.C., with Mom and Dad. He was supposed to have his life figured out by now. Both his parents determined he was going to college, and there was no question about it. Dad wanted him to go to an academy, like he did, but Jack knew he was never going to be the hero his father was. He wanted to be a surgeon. He had been around anatomy all his life, and it was something he could understand. He wanted to help people, like Mom.

Now, Jack couldn’t even help himself.

He could hardly move and could barely eat. He was the prisoner of a group of insane extremists, and he would be their tool to capture the most advanced technology in the galaxy, just so they use it for themselves. Completely oblivious to the fact that the same technology would destroy them.

The United States had unintentionally declared war on the Decepticons when they captured their leader. Something Megatron would not forgive. He would have his revenge on the race that had wronged him. He would destroy the Autobots, first, so that nothing was in his way. And a horrible show of power that nothing could stop him. It made Jack’s blood run cold.

There was no reason Megatron would give him dark energon.

The dictator had to have known that the substance was lethal to humans. Or at least, thought as much. Maybe Megatron had the intention of terminating Jack. Or maybe it was some twisted science experiment, to see what effects dark energon had on a human boy. Perhaps, Megatron knew it would corrupt his body.

Jack glanced down at his hands. His fight with Vince couldn’t have been two days ago, if even that. The scratches that had covered his knuckles were closed. The bright red skin had turned into a healing pink. They would fade soon. The teenager’s chest clench. It was dark energon, regenerating the body of its host, faster than it should.

The Decepticon leader hadn’t returned the boy to the Autobots to save his life or just to send him to the Pentagon. Megatron wanted him as his little puppet—his pet. A perfect little spy, that had no choice but to bend to his will and his alone.

Jack still didn’t understand how it worked. With just a chunk of dark energon, Megatron could control an army. With just a sip of it, he could control Jack. How was that possible? How could blood alone, give him total dominance? The teenager closed his eyes.

He felt something in the back of his mind. Dark, restless, powerful. Like an intrusive thought he didn’t want, but was it there, waiting to surface. Hatred, ambition, anger. At a cruel and unjust world.

Instead of recoiling, Jack pressed against the darkness. He prodded it, gently, tentatively. Then it uncoiled, like a snake being roused from slumber. Then the army brat felt a familiar dark presence.

Jack?

The army brat screamed. He snapped open his eyes and almost fell out of the bed. He stamped down at the dark corridor, pushing it back. Pushing Megatron back. The tyrant did not reply this time.

Jack’s heart hammered in his chest, pounding in his ears. He panted heavily, his shoulders heaving. He buried his face in hands, only to find his brow sweaty.

No, no, no…
This could not be happening.

This could not be happening.

The teenager was so wrapped up in his panic attack, he didn’t hear the door open. Or the footsteps nearing him.

“Jack? What’s wrong?” DeBiase asked, the concern in his voice sounding almost genuine.

Jack almost spun around and sucker punched the doctor. Instead, he merely flinched at the hand that tentatively laid across his shoulder.

“Don’t touch me!” Jack spat, smacking the offending hand away.

DeBiase wisely pulled back. “It’s alright. I just want to see if you’re okay. Make sure you’re not having any reactions to the tranquilizers.”

“Didn’t know you cared.”

The doctor frowned. “Silas’s orders.”

“I know he doesn’t.”

“If you get hurt or sick, it could complicate the negotiations.”

Jack’s stomach twisted and his skin crawled in disgust. DeBiase said it simply, like it was as factual as the weather. Was this even the same man that Jack grew up with? That gave him and his mother comfort during the worst time of their lives, and even provided them a home? It was his hospital that encouraged June to move in the first place.

Or was it all a lie? That he was just a maniac, that detested his father, his family, and his country. Did he merely befriend Mom, to get close to Dad, a Ranger, to feed information back to MECH? Jack didn’t know anything, not anymore. He merely knew he could not trust this bastard what called himself his guardian.

“Can I at least check you over?” DeBiase requested, almost gently. “I won’t hurt you, I promise.”

You already did, Jack wanted to retort. It didn’t matter if it wasn’t physical. He glared at the doctor, but he remained in his spot. Realizing he wasn’t going to go away unless he did what he wanted, Jack complied. DeBiase’s shoulders slumped, but his relief was immediately replaced by that professional mask Jack had seen so many times.

“Remove your shirt, please,” DeBiase ordered politely, already fishing through his bag for utensils.

Jack glared but did so, instinctively hunching up when the cool air touched his skin. To add to the absurdity of the situation, DeBiase’s examination was pretty procedural, so much so it felt like Jack was having another check-up. He observed the boy’s reflexes, his breathing, his heartrate…

DeBiase squinted. “Odd. You’re heartbeat’s a little irregular.”

The doctor didn’t elaborate, instead continuing over to check over his body. Noticing the distorted, jagged pink marks from his shoulder blades to the small of his back. DeBiase glared skeptically, and Jack realized they weren’t there last time the doctor examined him.

Just to prove his point, the dictator’s talons pierced Jack’s flesh.
He quickly tried to think of an excuse, however pathetic, when the man concluded, “Those robots had something to do with this?”

“…You could say that,” Jack admitted.

DeBiase made a disgusted noise and shook his head. “Damn army can’t even control their own tech.”

Jack immediately bristled at the accusing, condescending tone. “The Autobots aren’t robots.”

“What are they supposed to be, then?”

“They’re sentient beings.”

“Maybe some kind of advanced AI—”

“No,” Jack seethed. “Actual, coherent, emotional sentient beings from another planet.”

DeBiase looked at him like he spouted a second head. “Jack, I know you’re upset with me—”

“I’m not being sarcastic.”

The doctor gave up with a sigh. Jack gritted his teeth as he continued in a tone that matched a parent humoring their child that Santa Claus was real. “Does that Colonel Lennox know that they were responsible?”

“It wasn’t—” Jack paused as he grinded his teeth and shut his eyes. It was only then he realized. “They didn’t hurt me.”

“I had every intention of destroying you.”

“But you—”

“The Autobots would never hurt me.”

“But apparently Prime believes leaving you in my care is more merciful.”

DeBiase frowned. “Jack, you can talk to me, just please—”

“Talk?!” Jack repeated in a spat. “How can I talk to you? How can I trust you? Everything you did to Mom?”

“If you just let me explain—”

“There’s nothing to explain. You lied to Mom! You lied to me! You lied Dad!” Jack’s narrowed eyes were dark with rage. “How long were you part of MECH? Ever since Dad was a Ranger?”

DeBiase furious shook his head. “No. I enlisted with MECH because of your father. The government hurt you and your mother. Someone was to pay.”

Jack could only stare in shock, trying to register the impossible words. He had witnessed the memories of a vicious warlord, from his ascension to power to his fall into madness. He had seen how the Champion’s sanity crumpled underneath the betrayal of those he called friends and an unjust society. Jack thought Megatron was crazy.

But to hear it from a human.
To turn against the entire foundation of civilization just because of a grudge.

“If a few lives is what it takes, then so be it.”

Jack’s eyes went impossibly wide and his mouth gapped open. “You want to murder thousands of lives just because you’re sick of it?”

“I don’t want to. But sometimes in order to chance things for the better, it’s a necessary evil.”

“Are you even listening to yourself?” Jack cried, shaking his head. “That doesn’t make things better! That’s not peace! You’re just doing the same thing as everybody else!”

If Jack killed Megatron now, it wouldn’t be ending a war. It would be murder. He would be no better than the tyrant.

DeBiase’s eyes narrowed into a glare. “We’re not the same lunatics that hide in a cave. We don’t off ourselves for a bunch of virgins and rivers of honey. We fighting for a real cause. Unlike your father.”

Jack shut his eyes tight. He tried to fight the trembling in his limbs, but failed as his whole body quivered. He willed the tears not to come.

“I’ll come back,” Dad went on, firmly, assuring. “But until then, you have to take care of your mother. You’re the man of the house, now.”

Jack only nodded. He had to be brave, like Dad.

“Soldiers don’t cry,” the boy remembered, pushing down a sob.

“Sure, we do,” Dad argued calmly.

Jack couldn’t help it. He lunged forward, wrapped his small arms around his father’s thick neck. The man instinctively returned the gesture with one of his bear hugs.

“I love you, son.”

Jack swallowed, but throat felt raw and it hurt.

“I’m sorry, Michael,” the boy whispered.

Despite the man was his guardian, he hardly ever called the doctor by his first name. Not even Mom did often, as she worked so much with him in the hospital, she hailed him by his surname in a gesture of professionalism. The soft statement made DeBiase’s stern features fall, knowing Jack only said his name in affection. The man shifted, possibly to give the distraught boy a comforting touch.

Only for Jack to snatch his wrist in a vice grip.

The boy’s vision turned a purple hue as burning rage coursed through his veins. He was no one’s servant.

He jumped off the bed in a blink of an eye. DeBiase moved in attempt to pry the teenager off of him, but he was denied when Jack twisted his arm—the wrong way. The doctor grunted in pain, gritting teeth. Before he could collapse on the floor, the teenager rushed forward, slamming his shoulder into the large man.

This time the mad doctor let out a cry. Jack dug his heels in as he felt DeBiase push back with a
growl. Acting quickly, the boy reached up and seized a handful of the man’s hair. Instead of pulling at it in a cheap move, he shoved his captor’s head into the wall with all his strength. There was a loud thud as DeBiase’s skull collided with the concrete with a muffled grunt.

Suddenly the vice grip on Jack loosened. He reeled back just as the doctor slid to the floor, head lolling. He was alive. Jack could tell he was alive. But the fact he had almost killed another human being did not scare him. It was how easy it was.

Jack felt hot. He was light-headed and dizzy. His heart was beating rapidly in his chest. The teenager knew it wasn’t an adrenaline rush. It was something worse. The same thing that drove him to attack Vince, and attack his friends.

The boy shut his eyes, tight, trying to push down the foreign instinct. Megatron wasn’t going to make him hurt anyone else again.

With that, the boy tore towards the door. DeBiase must have been so distracted that he forgot to lock it, as the knob twisted. He cracked the door open, only to give a sigh of relief. No guards. Apparently, Silas didn’t see a drugged prisoner a threat. Even though, Jack was slow and silent as he cautiously stepped out of his cell, quietly closing the door behind him. And locking it.

He was in a long hallway with gray, lifeless walls, fluorescent lights glaring down at him. There were no windows, and the air was stuffy. And he thought the Pentagon was drab.

*If I got out of there, I can get out of here,* Jack told himself. He didn’t feel any better.

The army brat doubled over, staying low as he quickly went down the corridor. As if it would help. The hallway was barren—not so much as a piece of furniture or a broom closet. All anyone had to do was step around the corner and he would be found.

Jack slowly, cautiously, pressed himself against the wall. Hesitantly, he inched his head around the corner, just enough for a single eye to look down the adjacent corridor. The same time a pair of militiamen came into view.

The boy gasped and flinched back behind the corner, but thankfully the men were too deep in conversation to hear him. He had only saw a glimpse of their tall forms, and his heart somehow beat faster. He heard it roaring in his ears. He prayed his captors couldn’t hear it.

At the Pentagon, the guards only wore the standard uniform of a thin shirt and trousers and a belt of ammunition. The guards of MECH wore full body armor, complete with bulletproof vests and combat boots. Instead of standard-issued pistols, an assault rifle hung from their shoulders. At the Pentagon, Jack had to avoid getting caught and arrested. Now he had to be avoid being found and killed.

Jack swallowed and did not dare breathe until the mutters of the soldiers faded into nothingness. Sucking air through his gritted teeth, he slipped into the next corridor, keeping just as silent. He was actually grateful he lost his shoes. Last thing he needed to be shot because of squeaky tennis shoes.

The cogs in the teenager’s brain as he continued his journey through the dank hallways. How was he going to get out of here? The building alone had to be crawling with guards, and there was no telling how many filled the base. It could be a couple dozen to over a hundred. And if he didn’t get a bullet, he had to get out of the camp itself. Jack didn’t even make the football team. He doubted he could sprint across an open field.

He could call someone, he supposed. Fowler could send the army or even the Autobots. Problem
was, Jack had no idea where he was. And he had to actually get a phone. That wasn’t guarded by someone with a rifle in their hands. The army brat tried to assure himself. He had no communications when he escaped the Nemesis.

But you had Arcee, he reminded himself. Arcee wasn’t here. No one was.

The boy almost cried with relief when a staircase came into view. He took two steps at a time, clearing it seconds. He was greeted with a door, but instead of bursting through it, he pried it open with as slow as the last one.

A draft of fresh air greeted him. Along with gunpowder and smoke. Jack peered through the crack between the door and the threshold. It was some kind of garage or even a warehouse. Piles of large, plastic crates were crammed in a large room, hardly giving space to even walk. There were several shelves, filled all kinds of sized boxes and a plethora of tools. No guards.

Taking a chance, the teenager swung the door open and practically dived for the closest pile of crates. He cringed as the hinges squeaked as the door swung shut again, but no one came running. Jack held his breath once again as the murmur of voices drifted over his hiding place, but this time there were more than two. A roar of an engine filled the warehouse, but the teenager saw no vehicle in sight.

Determining the coast was clear, he hurried away. Jack was practically doubled over, balancing on his haunches as he slipped from one crevice to the next. It was too soon when he heard a deep, familiar voice. With a curse, the military brat dived to the closest stack of crates. Just as Silas and one of his lieutenants stepped into view.

“My contact informs me that NEST is having a hard time controlling the robots,” the MECH leader was saying, hands clasped behind his back. “Whether Colonel Lennox agrees to my demands or not, one of them will be in our possession.”

Jack’s stomach twisted. He crouched lower to the ground when the voices came closer.

“What about the boy?” the lieutenant questioned.

“Even though it’s not much, he’s seen the inside of our base. He’s a liability. I’ll give him until the deadline.”

As if the army brat needed anymore confirmation that Silas planned to kill him. Still, how casually the man had said it sent chills down his spine. He would just waste a life, in his crusade against a messed up world.

“Kill me, and the Autobots would retaliate,” Jack pointed out. “Arcee would come after you.”

Would they? They weren’t there before, when Jack needed them. Just like they weren’t here now.

The army brat swallowed the lump in his throat and hurried to the next crevice. Silas was gone, but the barks and shouts of soldiers were near, along with the growl of more than one engine. Even with all the noise, Jack did not dare breathe or move and his heart felt like it would burst from his chest. There was an opening between two boxes, which the boy peered through.

On one side of the warehouse was a collection of metal barrels, some standing alone while others were stacked in neat piles. There was a technician weaving a forklift between them, as another snapped orders. The vehicles cut too close to a stack more than once. Which would of have disastrous consequences, as Jack stared at the deadly symbol plastered on each barrel.
Biohazard.

What? What was MECH doing? Jack swallowed, and he realized he didn’t want to find out. He glanced to the other side of the warehouse.

This side was open to the elements, the garage door pulled open and showing the world outside. Jack’s stomach twisted when sure enough, buildings surrounded the warehouse, armed militiamen crossing the grounds. By the opening itself, there was a group of soldiers, only wearing half their body armor, conversing leisurely.

Next to them was a large, army-green Humvee, that almost looked like Bulkhead. The engine was turned on, growling loudly even as it sat in place, reverberating with horsepower. Jack watched as suddenly the driver’s side open, revealing a soldier in fatigues. He jumped out and trotted to the other side of the warehouse. Leaving the Humvee still running.

Jack swallowed and eyed the length of the warehouse another time. There were no guards near him. All the extremists in sight were preoccupied, either distracted by their tasks or their comrades. He felt his heart began to pound against his ribcage. It was now or never.

Jack settled on his haunches and gave one last look. The coast wasn’t clear, but it was close enough. With that, the teenager made a dash for the Humvee.

He slid into a stop, but didn’t slow down fast enough, slamming into the armored vehicle with a thud. He froze as he pressed his back against it, waiting. For a shout, a gunshot, or an alarm. Nothing, but silence.

Slowly, carefully, Jack turned and pulled the door handle. It opened with a click, and he did not hesitate to slip into the driver’s seat. The keys were in the ignition, by some divine intervention, but he quickly realized the truck was nothing like a motorcycle.

The truck was wide, wider than most vehicles and its length beat a SUV’s. It was weird to see pedals at his feet, so much so that he had to quickly think which was which. A series of gages was spread out before Jack, and a couple he did not recognize. A clutch was by his right, complete with a series of gears he had no idea what they were for.

“Oh, you can do this, Jack,” the teenager muttered to himself.

He placed his hands on the steering wheel, just as a furious yell sounded.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

It was the driver. He was stomping back towards his forgotten vehicle, glaring at the stowaway in his seat. Jack flinched, hand automatically flying to the clutch.

“Oh… I’m just borrowing it!” the teenager replied, pulling it into drive.

A pistol appeared in the soldier’s hands the same time Jack slammed on the accelerator. Not as fluid or fast as Arcee, but the Humvee shot forward with surprising speed. A group that had been loitering in front of the garage were dove towards the ground with startled yells to avoid the gigantic vehicle.

Jack had one eye looking for the closest exit and the other eye on the ground in front of him. Thankfully, no one shot at him, many of the extremists too caught off guard by the out-of-control Humvee to grab a gun. The army brat wheeled around buildings, going so fast and turning so harshly, the broad tires squealed as they skidded across the ground. It was none too soon when a chain-linked fence making up a gate came into view.
Jack did not hesitate.

He straightened out the Humvee and pushed the pedal to the floor. The vehicle roared and shot forward, closing the distance in seconds. The teenager shut his eyes in reflex as the hood slammed into the fence. There was a bone-jarring impact and the engine sputtered in protest and a horrible thud as bent and broken metal struck the armor of the vehicle.

Jack opened his eyes.

The confining space of the base was gone. Instead, he tore down a dirt road, lush trees all around him. He was free. The army brat laughed in victory. He didn’t need a Transformer, after all.

Jack was so caught up in his celebration, he almost didn’t look into the rearview mirror. His triumphant shout died in his throat when he saw what was behind him. A group of armored soldiers on motorcycles, quickly closing the distance between him.

The teen cursed. He just couldn’t catch a break, could he?

The military brat pushed the pedal to the metal, but the motorcycles accelerated quicker and apparently, were faster. It was only a matter of seconds before the first one caught up to the Humvee’s side. Jack didn’t notice it in his blind spot until he looked out the window, only to see a barrel of a pistol pointed in his direction.

The boy yelped and instinctively swerved, just as bullets ricocheted off the armored vehicle. Webs of cracks appeared on the window, but thankfully none of the projectiles had enough velocity to pierce the toughened glass.

Jack felt his veins grow hot. His focus turned into a tunnel-vision, sharp and narrow. He realized what he had to do.

He straightened out again, just before the Humvee slammed into the thick trunk of a tree. He glanced over his shoulder to see the motorcyclist was still there. Daring to take his attention off the road, Jack eyed the rider in the sideview mirror. He stayed straight, even as the extremist’s came closer and closer. The pistol reappeared in the soldier’s hands.

With a yell, Jack pivoted the wheel, towards the motorcycle. There was a hard thud as truck slammed into the rider and a high-pitched squeal as metal hit metal. The motorcycle ricocheted off the steel-plated vehicle, and the driver desperately tried to regain control, but it was too late. The motorcycle toppled over, and the extremist was send head over heels across the ground.

One down. Two to go.

After watching their buddy eat dirt, the other two riders were more cautious approaching the runaway Humvee. They would slowly and hesitantly, but determined, creep closer. When Jack deemed they were in range, he spun the wheel, only for the motorcycle to veer out of the way. The trick almost sent him into the woods more than once, and the army brat realized he would have to change tactics.

Especially when they started shooting at him once again.

Jack instinctively ducked as cracks and pings came from the back window. It was only a matter of seconds until the entire screen was covered with broken glass, and he realized it would only take a few more hits for the bullets to force their way through.

He swerved once again, trying to avoid the volley of projectiles, but it was hard when the Humvee
took up almost the entire road. The teen didn’t realize the desperate motions were hindering his speed, until he heard a distinctive thud from the ceiling.

“Oh, come on!” Jack complained, craning his neck up, only to realize there no sunroof. Or anyway to see the extremist that had latched onto his ride.

He continued his serpentine driving, but he saw no body fly off the roof. Nor did the motorcycle behind him slow down. Jack gritted his teeth. Arcee would be able to take these guys on easily. Any of the Autobots. Megatron would waste them.

Through the heat, the boy felt the warlord’s destructive, hungry nature. How easy it would be just to —

He shoved it down. No, never again.

Then Jack had an idea.

A stupid idea, but an idea nonetheless.

He eyed the motorcycle behind him—still a safe distance from the runaway truck. Jack slowed down by the slightest degree. The pursuer inched closer. The army brat’s heart raced faster and faster with each second, until he heard a roar in his ears. Finally, finally, the motorcycle pulled in close.

Jack slammed on the brakes.

The wires squealed in protest, throwing up dust and dirt into the air. An armored soldier above him flew over the hood, crashing hard on ground in front of the vehicle. A sickening thud came from the metal behind him, accompanied by an ear-splitting shatter as the back window finally gave. Jack grunted at the jarring jolt, his body almost being thrown threw the windshield.

Panting, he glanced back. Sure enough, the window was gone, and so was his pursuer. Thankfully, the man had not flown through the opening, rather laying on the ground. Jack heard a muffled moan in front of the vehicle, telling the other soldier was not any better.

With a shaky sigh, the teenager quickly pressed on the gas again. He rounded the limp form of the unconscious extremist, and sped off towards his escape.
Jack sped away as fast as the Humvee would allow. There were no signs of civilization—no markers, no signs, no buildings. Just trees and a wide trail of dirt that passed as a road. The surrounding forest had even begun to take it back, grass and shrubs inching across the path from each side. Whatever this road was, it hadn’t been used in awhile. And it was far from any city or town.

The army brat would glance at the mirrors every few seconds, his muscles tensed and expecting to see another set of motorcyclists or even other Humvees. There was only open road behind him. Part of Jack was relieved he wouldn’t have to go through another absurd car chase, but it formed another block of dread.

Silas didn’t go through so much trouble to kidnap him just to let him go. The MECH leader was up to something, and Jack didn’t want to stay around to find out what he had in store. The teenager thought back to the last time things were this bleak—when he and Arcee were stranded in China. Their only focus was finding civilization—the details came later. Jack realized that would be his only mission. Hopefully, it would be before he ran out of gas.

He jumped when suddenly the radio came to life with static, buzzing and whirring as it connected to a frequency. Suddenly a familiar drawl filled the cab.

“Where are you going with my truck, Darby?” Silas demanded, his tone irritated and impatient.

Jack didn’t bother to answer, merely glaring at the radio before turning his attention back to the road.

“I know you can hear me,” Silas continued adamantly. “Answer me.”

Jack rolled his eyes. Like he was going to do that. He looked at the radio again, trying to find the mute button.

“You’re only making things worse for yourself.” Wow, that was original. “We know exactly where to are.”

Sure they did. Silas wouldn’t be asking, if he could track the vehicle’s movements. Giving up on silencing the radio, the teenager looked back up to see a short, wooden bridge ahead of him. It looked sturdy enough. Last thing Jack needed was his getaway car to drown.

“It looks like you’re coming up to a river.”

With a flinch, the army brat slammed on the brakes. The wires squealed as they threw dust, skidding to a halt right before the bridge.

“Now you’ve stopped.”

Jack sent a narrowed glare at the radio. He should have known, that MECH would put GPS trackers in their vehicles. He tried to think of a solution to his predicament. Mostly, how to call Silas’s bluff.

“Now that I believe I’ve gotten your attention,” the man went on. “Tell me what you think you are doing with my truck.”
Jack rolled his eyes. After another moment’s hesitation, out of defiance more than anything, he snatched the walkie-talkie attached to the radio and thought of the first smart-ass thing that came to mind.

“I’m going to Disneyland,” he snapped sarcastically.

“You’re lying,” Silas deadpanned.

“Nope. Dead serious.”

“Then you have a long drive ahead of you.”

At least he knew he wasn’t anywhere near California. Where was he, then?

“Okay, how about you tell me to the quickest way to get there?” Jack continued, having every intention of testing the maniac’s patience.

“I’m not that stupid. And I know you’re smarter than you look.”

“Hey, you are a nice guy.”

“If you’re really smart,” Silas continued, tired of his sarcasm, “you’ll stay where you are and wait for my men to fetch you.”

“Hmm…” Jack paused for thought. “Nah.”

With that, he slammed the walkie-talkie with as much force as possible onto the headboard. It fell apart with a crunch and Jack jumped out of the car before the tiny plastic pieces fell to the floor. Only when his bare feet hit the gravel of the ground, he was reminded of his predicament.

He was completely surrounded by thick forest in all directions, and all he had to his name were the clothes on his back. Not even a pair of shoes. The last thing Jack needed was to get caught just because of a splinter.

Without another thought, he threw the back of the Humvee open. If Silas contacted him just to brag that he had found him, it meant the lunatic was close. Very close. Jack guessed he had a few minutes, if even that, to strip search an entire vehicle for anything useful.

Thankfully there were several plastic cases, and Jack hurried to flip them open. He wasn’t surprised when the first one was filled to the brim with assault rifles. Not seeing any ammunition in sight, he decided to leave it alone. The next crate had better results. It was full of fatigues, complete with boots.

Jack didn’t hesitate. For the first time in his life, those countless uniform inspections came in handy. He ripped off his over-shirt, replacing with a camouflage jacket. It was a size too big, along with the trousers, but the teenager knew that he had more important problems. He slipped on the combat boots that swallowed half his leg, more than one size too big. The army brat compensated by tying the shoelaces as tight as possible.

He didn’t believe the camouflage would make him invisible, especially to the trained eye, but he hoped it would at least make them give a second glance. He quickly skimmed through the rest of the cases, only to find more useless weapons. Nothing that could help him navigate the woods with a furious army after him.

With that, Jack ran into the forest. Every instinct in his body screamed to run as fast as he could, to
get as much distance between him and his pursuers as possible. The army brat obeyed for the first few strides, taking off into a sprint until he forced himself to slow down.

He knew a mad sprint would just drain him quickly, allowing his pursuers to catch up in his exhaustive rate. He had to keep a steady pace, keep moving ahead of them. Wait until they gave up or he found help. Whatever came first. Jack realized it wasn’t a matter of outrunning his enemy, but *outlasting*.

Oh, who was he kidding? MECH was made up of a bunch of lunatics, but built, highly-trained lunatics. They had all-terrain vehicles and had helicopters to patrol the skies. They could hunt a lot longer than he could run, and they had the means to end it quickly.

*I was the same with Airachnid*, he told himself. *When she chased you in that forest.*

But Jack knew the only reason he survived the sadistic huntress was because she wanted to toy with her prey, like a cat playing with a mouse. He had a feeling MECH did not have the same interest.

*You held your own against one of my greatest hunters. Perhaps there is something… more, to you humans.*

Megatron was *impressed* by him, and Jack didn’t know why. He destroyed Airachnid’s ship in a desperate last resort, and it didn’t even kill her. If anything, it had just pissed her off, and left her trapped on Earth. The Insecticon almost killed him, if Arcee hadn’t found him.

It was Arcee that came for him when he was trapped on the *Nemesis*, and guided him through China. She had come for him, when Megatron enforced his will upon him. She was always there. No matter what happened, no matter how hurt Jack was, she always came. Because Arcee was his guardian. His partner. His best friend.

And all he had done was push her away. Jack shut his eyes tight.

*I’m so sorry, Arcee. This is all my fault*, he thought, as if the Autobot could hear him.

Now he was running for his life from a terrorist organization bent on destroying the world, and trying to fight off the dark thoughts of a destructive dictator.

*He reminds me a great deal of Orion Pax.*

He was nothing like Optimus. He wasn’t a leader. He wasn’t brave, he wasn’t strong, he wasn’t smart. The boy’s desperate escape from the base meant nothing. He had merely delayed the inevitable. Jack wouldn’t be surprised if Megatron was bored of him by now. Such a weak creature was no use of him.

Even with those morbid thoughts, Jack forced himself to keep going, alternating between a jog and a fast walk. The forest was untouched. The trees took up as much space as possible, standing like giant guardians. Thick foliage crowded the forest floor, so that the boy had to barge his way through brush, only to step out covered in scrapes. Debris formed a layer over the ground, letting out a loud crunch with each step. The teenager could only hope if MECH decided to follow him, they would have just as a hard time as he did.

As Jack trekked on, he watched the sun move across the sky above him, telling hours had gone by. Sweat began to coat his skin, having his borrowed clothes stick to him. His legs began to ache, which only grew with each step. The teen really regretted skipping gym so much.

With a groan, he leaned against the rough bark of a tree. The instinct to flee had been replaced with
the command to rest, to not move and never get up. Jack knew he didn’t have that option. He had glanced over his shoulder and at the canopy above, braced to see familiar figures searching for him. The army brat saw no signs of MECH, but he did not have to see them to know they were out there. And it was only a matter of time before they caught up to him.

He shut his eyes tight, as if when he opened them, he would wake up from this absurd nightmare. Only when he did, he was greeted with a particular sight.

A cluster of buildings, tucked against a tall hillside. But instead of solid concrete, they were made only of wood. The once vibrant paint had long faded into dull shades and rotted away at the infrastructure. There were only a couple two-story structures, while the rest were simple one-floor designs. One house was even collapsed—its roof gone and debris filling its interior.

Jack squinted. Obviously no one had been here in quite a while. He glanced over at the hillside, only to see a black abyss within the hillside, a rotted wooded frame around it. A mining town, then. It must have been abandoned after the mine ran dry.

Taking his chances and realizing he had no choice, Jack slowly and carefully slid down the ravine before him. He stumbled onto the flat ground and made his way to the town. He had heard his fair share of ghost towns and abandoned structures, but he never expected it to be so creepy.

The air was deathly quiet, not even a breath of wind. There was no sign of life, not even the scampering of an animal. Some of the buildings still looked preserved, so much so that Jack half-expected to look through the stained window and see a face.

*Is that fear I sense, boy?*

Oh, how Megatron would revel that he was unnerved by a few structures. Jack quickly shook his head.

*Focus.*

Jack’s thoughts were interrupted by a dull, distant sound. It sounded like the air was being chopped, cut apart by sharp blades. He recognized it immediately. A helicopter.

Automatically the army brat flinched, snapping his gaze back and forth, trying to look in every direction at once. There was nowhere to hide, save for the handful of shops that surrounded him. Jack sprinted towards the closest building, practically leaping over the steps that led to the front door. He rammed his shoulder into it, only for the door to quiver at the jarring impact, but did not budge. It was then Jack remembered he didn’t make the football team. The sputtering engine drew closer, and his panic rose. Part of him prayed it was a civilian or even a rescue team. Part of him knew it wasn’t. Either way, he couldn’t risk getting spotted. He slammed against the door again. Another horrible thud, but it did not move. He stuck it again and again. The helicopter came closer and closer.

Finally, with a loud *bang*, the barrier caved in. Jack yelped as the momentum sent him stumbling through. He caught himself on his hands and knees, only to hiss in pain as glass and splinters dug into his palms. He ignored the pain as he slipped next to the window, peering out with a single eye.

The same moment he settled, a large, gray helicopter appeared in the sky above him. Long and bulky, it was like the same ones he saw all the time as a kid, but it was all wrong. The hatch was open, revealing several figures filling its belly, heads low and weapons raised as they scanned the forest below. Jack swallowed and pressed against the wall, not daring to even breathe.

*Keep going, keep going, keep going,* he prayed, hoping the MECH helicopter would leave his hiding
place alone.

It didn’t.

The helicopter lazily hovered for a solid minute, before the soldiers apparently decided to search the town themselves. The chopper moved closer and lower and suddenly half a dozen ropes fell from its belly. Allowing half a dozen extremists to slide down the lines as a dizzying speed, landing square on their feet on the solid ground.

Jack cursed. He had to get out of here, now. Not daring to near the front of the store, which was in full view of the militiamen, he dashed to the back of the store. He was nearly doubled over, which resulted in him almost tripping over piles of debris. The teenager thanked both God and ingenious builders that there was a second door tucked away in the corner.

Jack threw it open, much easier than the first one, but cringed at the high-pitched, long squeal the rust-covered hinges caused. He jumped out of the store just as he heard a surprised shout from the main entrance.

The army brat cursed again and kept moving, staying as low to the ground as possible while keeping up his pace. He heard the barks and shouts of the soldiers as they split up, deciding to go building from building. The boy heard his heart pounding in his ears. Every instinct instructed him to bolt into the woods—but the town was cut off from the forest and he would be exposed on the open ground—MECH would see him. He doubted he could troll them for long before they caught him. He needed somewhere to hide—and fast.

It was an absurd game of cat and mouse as Jack sprinted building to building, diving towards the ground whenever he heard a shout or a scuffle of a boot. More than once, he saw the dark form for a fully armed soldier, knowing all they had to do was turn their head to see him. He didn’t dare enter most of the structures, hearing the slams and thuds within as MECH tore it apart, searching for him. Only a couple he dared to duck into, but not for long before he had to scam again.

Eventually Jack found himself in a two-story building, which he translated was once a house. The wallpaper was faded and peeled, the winding staircase was rotted and broken, and all the furniture except for a single leather chair had been removed. Dirt and debris covered the floor, and the ceiling had caved in more than one place. The teenager was braced to take his leave, only to hear a couple shouts nearby. Very near.

Finding no shelter on the first floor, Jack took his chances by taking the stairs two steps at the time. The wood creaked and groaned under his weight, making him wince, but it did not cave and no one came running. The second floor was made up of several divided rooms, which he realized used to be bedrooms.

Once again there was no furniture, and the closets were too small or too damaged to hide him. His heart raced faster and faster as the shouts grew closer and closer. Finally, in the last barren room, Jack frantically looked around. He almost missed it, but somehow he noticed it, just when he was about to give up.

A dark, long crack in the wall, which turned to travel across the paneled wood. A door. More specifically, the door to the attic, at least some kind of storage space. It was good enough for Jack. He dashed towards it, just as he heard the loud slam below. MECH was inside the house.

It took a few furious, desperate tugs for Jack to force the panel open—revealing a dusty, moldy, cramped space. The army brat realized this wasn’t the time to be picky, and forced himself inside. He awkwardly had to contort his body to fit—bending his back and ducking his head, while keeping his
arms and knees close to his chest. He shut the door behind him, and held his breath.

He could hear them, right underneath his feet. The heavy footsteps of combat boots, the creaks of old doors being forced open, the rattling of gear. It sounded like there was only one, rather than several. Jack hoped it meant this one was stupid.

The military brat pressed himself in a tighter ball, holding his breath, as the sounds faded from the floor beneath him, only to hear a long creak further away. The soldier was on the second floor, moving room to room just like Jack had. There was a crack in the wall next to the boy’s head, allowing him to peer out with a single eye.

Only when he did, his heart stopped at the sight he saw.

Silas.

It took every ounce of Jack’s will not to scream or curse as the MECH leader scanned the room with cold, calculating eyes. His expression was stern as he looked for the tiniest flaw. The army brat hoped he would give up, that he would leave, that—

“I know you’re here, brat,” Silas snapped in a bark, loud enough the boy flinched. “Come on out.”

Jack tried to assure himself. *He’s bluffing—*

Suddenly there was a clap of thunder and the teenager screamed as the wood next to him split apart. Something sharp and deadly whizzed through the air in front of his nose, before the bullet lodged into the wall next to his head.

“Out,” Silas repeated, just as harsh and pistol still raised.

Jack’s heart was hammering in his chest, wide eyes fixated on the projectile that almost killed him. He realized the only reason it didn’t go through his head because the extremist had missed on *purpose.* He swallowed, thickly, knowing he didn’t have a choice.

“D-don’t shoot,” the army brat called out, hating how shaky his voice sounded.

Silas didn’t reply as Jack kicked the door open, revealing his supposed-to-be clever hiding spot. He crawled out of the space and shakily got to his feet, automatically raising his arms in submission. Silas didn’t much as crack a smile, his expression still set in stone while his dark eyes burned with barely contained fury.

“You thought you could get away so easily?” the MECH leader snarled.

“Seemed a good idea at the time,” Jack shrugged.

“How about now?”

“Not so much.”

Silas didn’t reply, instead waving his pistol towards the door. The order and the threat behind it was obvious. Jack gulped and stepped forward, fingers locked behind his head as the extremist settled behind him, the barrel of the gun uncomfortably close.

Jack shut his eyes, tight, trying to stamp down the frustration and willing the tears not to come. He was so *useless.* Everything he did, was for naught.

He couldn’t help the Autobots take down the Decepticons. He couldn’t help them take down
MECH. He couldn’t defend himself against Megatron. Just like he couldn’t defend himself against Silas. No wonder no one had come for him. Who would? Certainly not Megatron.

Silas had ushered his prisoner down the corridor. Jack’s heart was hammering his chest. No, he didn’t want to be weak anymore. He didn’t want to beg for mercy from someone who wouldn’t give it to him. He wanted to be strong, to fight, just like them.

Blood roared in his ears. Instincts stirred, awakened by a persistent tug. Jack felt the adrenaline—the dark energon—flow into his burning veins. Part of him knew it was his instincts, buried deep inside of him. Part of him knew it wasn’t.

They were further down the hallway.

Fight or flight.

Jack eyed the doorway in front of them, that cut off the second floor from the stairway. The door was wide open, still attached the hinges.

Life or death.

Silas was going to kill him, Jack was sure of that. It was only a question if the terrorist was going to kill him now, or in front of all his subordinates. The army brat hadn’t gone all this way, through all this hell, just to die without a fight. He wasn’t going to die to this insect.

Jack made his decision.

Just as the pair stepped through the threshold, the teen reached out and snatched the edge of the door. As fast and hard as he could, Jack whirled around and slammed it into Silas. The MECH leader let out a startled yell of pain as the door brutally rammed into his shoulder.

Jack took his chance, lunging forward and wrapping his hands around the barrel of the gun. The terrorist pushed back with his superior strength, and Jack found himself stumbling backwards, though still latched on the weapon between them. The teenager desperately tried to keep his hold, while Silas was trying to twist it, turning the barrel towards Jack’s direction.

The army brat reacted quickly, kicking out his leg, landing it right between the madman’s legs. Like he expected, Silas yelled in pain and doubled over, face screwed with discomfort. A stream of profanities poured from his mouth, many of which Jack’s mother would deem needed to be remedied with a bar of soap.

The gun fell from the terrorist’s hand, but Jack was unable to keep his hold on it and it clattered to the floor. He leapt back until there was several feet between them. Jack ignored the cramped surroundings, his focus tunneling on the target before him. He heard the roar of the arena, the crowd demanding blood and death. He would not be denied the high of another victory.

Taking a chance, the army brat rushed forward, hand outstretched to take the gun. Only for another to seize his wrist. Jack yelped in surprise and pain as Silas cruelly jerked his arm, dragging him to his feet. The momentum sent him forward, the man’s knee colliding with his stomach.

Jack wheezed as the air was ripped from his lungs and pain exploded from his abdomen. Before he could recover, he felt something hard ram into his temple, turning his vision white. The teenager gasped and stumbled back, blinking as dots danced over blurred shapes. Running on instinct and the heat coursing through his body, the military brat sent a punch towards Silas’s direction. The MECH leader easily blocked it with a single arm, sending the other into Jack’s temple yet again. This time it sent the boy to the ground with a cry.
“Not so clever now, are you?” Silas hissed, stalking towards him.

Jack was on his back, crawling backwards on his elbows, trying to keep the distance between them. It felt like his heart was about to burst from his chest. Silas was almost twice his size and had years of combat training. Jack only had a handful of self-defense lessons and—

**You need me.**

“No, I don’t,” Jack snapped under his breath, shutting his eyes tight.

**We both know you cannot defeat him.**

He tried to push the dark thoughts away, but they lingered in his mind like an echo. The teenager opened his eyes with a cry when suddenly a crushing weight landed on his shin. He immediately retracted his leg from Silas’s heel, desperately scrambling to his feet. Only to hiss as pain shot up his leg, barely able to hold him up.

“You’re out of your league, brat,” the extremist taunted.

“Like that’s gonna stop me,” Jack growled.

The jeering crowds of the Pits edged him on, sending the teenager forward again. This time he feinted left, Silas instinctively leaning in the direction. Leaving his right exposed. Jack shifted at the last second, sending a punch to the taller man’s head. This time the MECH leader caught in a crushing grip.

The army brat hissed as the pressure shot up his arm, which only grew as suddenly Silas twisted the appendage—the wrong way. Jack wailed as his entire body contorted in an odd angle, trying to reduce the damage. He felt the strain on the bone, tendons and muscles working to correct it, only to summon more agony. Just when the teenager thought it would break, Silas whirled around, dragging Jack’s entire body across the floor.

The boy cried out as his back slammed onto the wooden railing—and felt it fall apart underneath his weight. Jack’s cry turned into a scream as weightlessness seized him, all of his organs flying to his throat. It seemed like he was suspended in air for eternity, but it had to be only seconds. Even then, the ground came all too soon.

Jack whined with agony as he crashed onto the first floor, his shoulder collided with the hard wood. His head bounced off the surface, and it felt like a hammer struck across his skull. Bile rose to his throat and Jack opened his eyes, only to have blurred, double vision. No doubt he had a concussion. He gritted his teeth hard, trying to will his body to move, to get up, to fight. He could only twitch and squirm pathetically, moaning in agony. His entire body throbbed with pain, his muscles frozen in place, refusing to move. Over his whines, he heard heavy footsteps travel down the stairs, slowly, calmly.

Jack curled his hands into fists. No, he couldn’t die like this. Not after everything he had been through. He let out a pitiful noise when something struck his ribs, hard, rolling him to his back.

“**But until then, you have to take care of your mother. You’re the man of the house, now.**”


Jack swallowed down a metallic taste, his throat sore and raw. He felt the air squeeze from his lungs
as a heavy weight settled on his chest. The teenager instinctively tried to force himself up, only for a strong, unrelenting hand to shove him back down. He heard a sharp, metallic sound.

The darkness crashed over him like a tidal wave. He felt his senses dull, replaced by another.

The teenager forced his eyes open, ignoring the bright light pouring into the room, to see Silas’s menacing shadow above him. His lips were curled in a feral grin, like a lion catching a lamb. In his hand was a long, combat knife, glinting dangerously.

“You held your own against one of my greatest hunters. Perhaps there is something… more, to you humans.”

Jack felt something the back of his mind, stirring restlessly.

“I knew you would not disappoint.”

His veins suddenly became hot—too hot.

“You held your own against my kind, you survived alone in the mines, and you made a mockery of your own military. Yet they see you as helpless.”

Something cold, calculating, dark, pressed against his thoughts, eager and bloodthirsty.

“Young anger, your ambition, your hate.”

There was a pull in his mind.

“We share more in common than you do with Prime.”

Jack trembled.

“Megatron… I need you.”

The brat had been a thorn in Silas’s side for far too long. He interfered with their retrieval of the DINGUS and he ruined the perfect opportunity to take not one, but two robots. Now this ordeal. It was time to finish this absurdity. The negotiations could continue without the brat. DeBiase would be disappointed, but it was a small price to pay for the advancement of mankind.

Silas adjusted his grip on his combat knife. Old instincts died hard, as his body moved on its own accord. A single strike to the jugular would finish it. Quick and painless, more than the brat deserved.

“Goodbye, Jack,” the MECH leader purred.

He brought the dagger down.

Only for Jack Darby to stop it.

Silas blinked as the teenager’s arm shot out, effectively intercepting the strike from coming down on his neck. What— Suddenly Darby’s blinked.

Revealing iris of his eyes as a wicked purple color.

What the—
The MECH leader could stare at the boy that was blue-eyed just a matter of seconds ago. He saw—

He had no time to even finish his thought. In a blink of an eye, Darby wrapped his hand around the man’s wrist and curled his other into tight fist, sending it into Silas’s temple. He hissed as his spots danced across his vision and pain exploded across his skull, effectively knocking him off balance. The MECH leader grunted as he was thrown to the floor, but didn’t stay there long as his instinct kicked in.

He scrambled to his feet, jumping up just as the same time as Darby. Another surprised blink. A second ago that brat couldn’t even move. Now he was standing straight up, face set in a frown and tainted eyes in a narrowed glare. He was hunched over slightly, as if braced for the extremist to attack.

Fine. Silas would just knock him back down again, and make sure this time he wouldn’t get up.

The MECH leader shot forward, slicing the combat knife toward the brat’s chest. Only for Darby to leap backward just as quickly, the tip of the blade an inch from his heart. Gritting his teeth, Silas swiped the weapon again. And again and again.

Darby effortlessly dodged each time, ducking and weaving with impossible reflexes. As if he knew exactly how Silas was going to attack. The man narrowed his eyes. This brat was completely different than before. He seemed focused, his expression inscrutable as if his only thought was on his opponent. There were no weak attempts, no desperation in his movements. Just cold, calculating control.

Confused was the least way to describe how Silas was feeling. It was like the teenager gained a lifetime of combat training within a moment’s notice. It was impossible.

Finally the absurd game ended when Darby struck out, wrapping his hands around the hilt of the blade. Silas pushed against him like before, but the brat was as solid as a rock. Changing tactics, the MECH leader twisted his hold, only for the teenager to twist right with him. Silas snarled as Darby not only corrected the odd angle, but latched onto the man’s arm, screwing it instead.

Silas bellowed more in rage than pain as the tendons pulled, which only turned into a grunt when Darby kneed his gut. It was right underneath the armor, the teenager affectively avenging his treatment from before. When the man instinctively doubled over, the brat raised an elbow and sent it to the back of his head. Silas was able to catch himself from crashing to the floor, but his reflexes were slow from the unexpected and brutal assault.

He didn’t react in time when Darby’s iron grip snatched the scruff of his armor and pulled. Silas was thrown—quite literally—across the room, his back slamming against the wall. He grunted as the back of his head once against slammed into a hard surface and he slumped onto the ground, dizzy and in pain.

The last time he was like this was when that bomb went off.

Impossible. Impossible. He had gone through hell, and he was going to lose to some green little brat?

Silas tried to correct himself, but his vision was doubled and blurry as he watched Darby cross the room, but was completely ignoring him. Instead, the teenager walked over to the railing that went up the stairs. He took hold of a peg and kicked it once, twice—and the third it snapped off with a crack. Leaving a wicked sharp end.

Face still set in the stone expression, Darby walked back over, brandishing his newfound weapon
like a sword. Automatically Silas righted himself to all fours, trying to climb back to his feet, or at least strike back. Only for a heel to stomp down on his neck.

The extremist gagged as he was sent back down. Raising his arms in defense, he looked back up, only to see Darby’s menacing form above him. Weapon raised high, ready to kill him once and for all.

Chapter End Notes

To be continued…
Jack’s world only went by in shapes and images. His senses had been robbed, the pain had ebbed away, and any rational thought had been stamped down. The boy only heard Megatron’s whispers, speaking to him, ordering him, *coaching* him.

He obeyed every word, like a dog obeying every command.

Suddenly the world returned, but it was out of focus, blurry. Through the purple haze, Jack saw the broad form of Silas, but he was on the ground, unmoving. Had… had he done that?

*He tried to kill you. He tried to kill Arcee.*

Jack was faintly aware there was something in his hand, but he didn’t care. He just wanted this horrible nightmare to end.

*He tried to steal you away from me.*

Suddenly his vision cleared, just enough to see Silas’s scarred face. He had his hands raised in defense, as if to block another attack. His face was set in a furious snarl, fangs bared, but there was a strange gleam in his eyes. A gleam the army brat recognized. Fear.

*Kill him.*

Jack raised the sharpened weapon, high, with bloodlust—Megatron’s bloodlust—coursing through him. At long last, he could finish the monster that tried to destroy him, his friends, and his family. Along with countless others, just to sate his own thirst for power.

Jack heard Megatron’s purr, ordering him. To claim another victory. To watch another opponent fall. To see another enemy die.

“*Think of the glory! Seize the day! You know Optimus would…*”

“*Every sentient being has the right to choose their own destiny.*”

“No. Not like this.”

Jack gritted his teeth and the pain suddenly flared. He pushed against the presence that had enveloped his mind.

*What are you doing?*

No, this wasn’t him. He wasn’t a murderer. He wasn’t like Megatron.

*I won’t do it,* Jack replied.

The army brat shut his eyes tight, locking his muscles into place. His body would not be a puppet for Megatron to manipulate. He felt the warlord’s anger at his refusal, felt his claws slicing across the corridors of his mind. Jack yelled in agony.

*You will obey me.*

Suddenly something hard hit the boy’s legs. He wailed as they went out from underneath him. Some
dark, foreign instinct filled his mind, and he found himself rolling out of the way just a heel came down in the space he once occupied. He heard something, harsh and feral, but he couldn’t understand the crude sounds.

Instead he saw flashes of movement, his arms moving to block each one. Images of gladiators flashed across his vision, each and every desperate to defeat the Champion of Kaon—to survive his wrath. This is would be no different. He would not fall to a mere insect.

Jack gritted his teeth. Stop!

The burst of will dissipated in the cloud of darkness that had invaded his mind. He traded several more blows with the gladiator—Silas—each movement too fast, too foreign to register. It was all too familiar at the same time. He had seen though the Champion’s optics after all.

No! He wasn’t Megatron! He was Jack Darby! Something cold sliced across the thought, making him wince, but he willed other images to rise. Raf and Miko, his friends. Pain flailed across his skull, and he didn’t know if it was from Silas or Megatron. The Autobots—Bulkhead, Bumblebee, Ratchet, Optimus. Something stamped down on the train of thought. Jack shuddered.

Arcee. His partner.

A jagged sword flashed across the darkness, to slice the image in half. The teenager replaced it with another.

His mom. His dad.

The darkness froze, not knowing how to force its way past the memory. Because the tyrant wouldn’t have.

Using every ounce of willpower in his body, Jack shoved Megatron away—out of his mind—and built up walls to shut the bond between them. The blissful silence was shattered by an ear-splitting ring. He felt cold, the energy draining from his limbs.

The world turned into a blur and he fell into darkness.

Simmons was running out of torture—interrogation methods. Lennox had dared to talk to him about his predicament. Silas had given them 24 hours to deliver them an Autobot, or else Darby would be killed. An impossible demand by itself, and going through the rank of command, such a decision would not be made in a single day.

It was a bad play either way. If they waited until after the deadline, Darby would be a dead and the Autobots would declare war. If they agreed, an Autobot would be captive to the organization and the Autobots would declare war. So, Lennox came up with secret door number three.

Find MECH before the deadline, save Darby, and terminate that son of a bitch, Silas. Only problem was, no one knew where the terrorist organization was hiding. Fowler had returned to the Pentagon, talking to his friends at the CIA and NSA and the rest of the alphabet. The agent had reported that everybody had something on MECH. The spy agencies had been watching Silas for years, but he had yet to find an exact locations. Leave it to investigative agencies to find a piece of the puzzle, but too caught up in politics and jurisdiction to bother to share.

While Fowler played in the arena of Washington D.C. and Lennox used satellite imagery to scan the
entire planet, Simmons decided to take his own approach. They still had that MECH spy, who undoubtedly was rich with information. So, the former agent had taken the traitor somewhere quiet for a chat.

Except, he wasn’t chatty at all.

Frustrated was the least Simmons felt. He knew fanatics were tough to crack, but this nut-job was a complete another level. Every question was replied with an insult, every gap of silence was filled with ramblings of anti-government nonsense, every punishment brought mocking laughter. The most Simmons got out of him that he didn’t know where they had taken the kid, and the consultant highly suspected that was a lie.

It was the motorcycle, Arcee, that came to him with an idea.

Simmons smiled.

He barged through the door with the same intimidating slam as always, Lennox and Epps trailing behind him. The prisoner was still curled up in a pathetic little ball on his miserable little cot. He gave the slightest of flinches at the deafening noise, that only the trained eye could see. However, Anthony gave the smart-ass greeting as always.

“About time, I was getting lonely,” the MECH spy greeted in a hoarse voice, but somehow filled it with mocking venom. “Did you get that sandwich that I ordered?”

“Sorry, fresh out of turkey,” Simmons replied casually, pausing in the center of the room.

Anthony eyed the newcomers warily. Usually the men that supervised him were soldiers, not the commander himself. Lennox didn’t miss a beat.

“I think I can see where you had trouble,” the lieutenant colonel observed.

“This guy’s never gonna talk,” Epps agreed. “We’re wasting our time with this loser.”

Simmons noticed that victorious glint in the double agent’s eyes.

Lennox gave a heavy sigh. “The ‘Bots are losing it. I don’t know how much longer I can contain them.”

Epps gave a hard stare. “Lennox, you know what the treaty says. You know we got to do something.”

The commander frowned with a conflicted look. “I know. I hate that it has to come to this.” He looked to the consultant. “Simmons?”

The man nodded and took his cue. He stepped forward, snapping on a pair of cuffs on the prisoner’s wrists and pulled him to his feet. Instantly Anthony’s eyes narrowed in suspicion, most likely catching on that something was wrong. Usually a pair of soldiers would drag him to a different room, and then he would be interrogated. Simmons rarely did it himself.

“What’s going on?” the mole demanded, stubbornly standing rigid for a moment before Simmons pushed him forward.

“Well, I guess there’s not easy way to put it,” the Sector Seven agent replied. “But the problem is, you really messed up when you decided to screw over the robots. You robbed one of their favorite pets. They’re demanding reparations.”
Anthony only gave a baffled look as they traveled down the hall, Lennox and Epps still trailing behind. Simmons made sure the mole noticed they weren’t heading for the interrogation room.

“W-what’s that supposed to mean?” he asked.

“It’s a complicated ordeal, I’m not really sure how it works myself. Something to do with how they run things where they come from. But, long story short, you stole Jack Darby from the Autobots, and they want to war to get him back. Of course, no one wants that, so we had work something out.”

Anthony’s twisted face was priceless, but Simmons went on anyway.

“So, you know how these deals go, we worked out war reparations. MECH went after the Autobots, so you have to pay.”

“Pay what?”

“War reparations, pay attention. The ‘Bots agreed not to vaporize the human race, if we hand you over into their custody.”

Anthony’s eyes widened to the size of dinner plates, eyebrows shooting up to his hairline and jaw dropping. He sputtered, probably trying to come up with a protest, but Simmons merely shrugged.

“Eye for an eye kind of deal,” the agent smirked.

“Y-you can’t do that!” the spy wailed. “This is against my rights!” When no one humored him, he twisted around to face Lennox, even as Simmons kept dragging him along. “You’re going to let those things kill me?!”

“No,” Lennox replied, but his gaze was hard. “I’m just handing you over to their custody. What they do with you is their business.”

Anthony’s eyes widened, realizing he had no help. His refusal was yet again cut off when Simmons jerked him forward. The prisoner half-heartedly struggled, digging his heels in and randomly flailing, but the agent was able to keep his grip on him. Occasionally Lennox or Epps came to his aid if the MECH spy got too rowdy.

Eventually they made it to Hanger E, and not a moment too soon. The three men half-dragged, half-carried the prisoner through the doors, only to be greeted by darkness.

Naturally Anthony was snapping his gaze in every direction, trying to scan his surroundings all at once. It was impossible, as the pitch-black room only let him see a few feet in front of him. Even that privilege was taken from him, as the NEST officers shoved him to the ground, his face hitting the cold floor with a thud.

“Delivery!” Simmons sang out into the darkness as Anthony hastily scampered to his knees, but it was difficult with his arms pinned behind his back.

It was then the darkness in front of the humans moved.

There was a reverberating thud, followed by the clanking of metal and pull of wires. There was a low rumbling noise, and ice-blue eyes blinked from the darkness. Ironhide stepped forward like a jungle cat stalking from the brush, gazing down at the being one-fourth his size.

"Is this him?” the Autobot observed lowly. "He's so... scrawny."
"Most humans are," a cool, smooth voice replied and there was a blur of movement.

Even Simmons started and Anthony gasped as Arcee landed next to the prisoner. Balancing on all fours, she looked predatory with her wings raised and optics narrowed dangerously.

"You'll honor our agreement?" Lennox asked, raising his voice so the metal beings could hear him.

"As long as you miserable fleshlings don't steal from us again," Ironhide replied in a snarl.

"Noted."

"W-We didn't steal from you!" Anthony protesting, his voice quivering. He looked up at the menacing robot with wide eyes full of disbelief and fear.

"Do not lie to us, insect!" The double agent flinched at the furious bellow. However, Ironhide directed his attention to Arcee as he said, "Poor Arcee has been ruined without her pet."

Optics lined hateful red, proving the truth behind the words. Just as quickly, the truck snapped his cold gaze to the prisoner, raising his voice once again.

"Because you took him!"

It took several tries of Anthony opening and closing his mouth like a gasping fish before he could speak.

"I wasn't the one who did it! My job was to make sure the coast was clear! That's all!"

"A lie to save your own hide."

Ironhide leaned closer, looming over the man, his dark shadow swallowing him. Anthony trembled and continue fumbling for excuses.

"I-I didn't know he was yours! I thought he was just some kid!"

"I'm bored, Ironhide," Arcee drawled in a flat tone, lazily glancing at her comrade. "Let's get this over with."

"Yes, I'm so hungry!" an excited voice and there was movement from the side.

The white flash of Smokescreen appeared from the darkness. Only for him to vanish once again when Ironhide slapped his chest, sending him back.

"HE'S MINE!" the truck roared, his deep voice echoing throughout the hanger. Anthony tried to squirm away, only to freeze with the large Autobot leaned back over him like a predator cornering prey. “It’s been a millennia since I’ve had a good meal.”

The spy blanched with a violent tremble. He didn’t speak for a solid thirty seconds, frozen with fear. Ironhide grew impatient. Before the man could work up a scream, the metal giant scooped him up with a single servo.

“Wait, wait, wait!” Anthony yowled rapidly, flailing in his captor’s grip.

Ironhide ignored him as he raised the human two stories above the ground.

“I’ve been told the noisy ones have the best taste,” the Autobot mused.
He lowered his catch, and the spy screamed louder.

“I KNOW WHERE HE IS!”

Ironhide froze. Arcee perked up. The humans leaned forward.

Anthony was rigid, face twisted in a wince as he braced for what was to come. Instead, the truck lowered his prisoner eye-to… whatever-they-called-their-eye. The man leaned away as he was held a matter of inches from that narrowed glare.

“Prove it,” Ironhide growled lowly.

For his credit, Anthony hesitated, wondering if damning himself was worth it. Apparently he made up his mind, as he stammered, “Th-they took him to one of our training camps.” At the robot’s glare, he added hastily, “It’s near a m-mining town in T-Texas. Forty miles north of Houston.”

Simmons almost cried out in joy. Ironhide’s stern, deadly expression was broken by a wide, satisfied smile.

“Good pet,” the Autobot chirped in a condescending tone.

He lowered his catch to the ground, careful not to cause any more harm. Poor Anthony quivered the entire way down, only to let out an undignified, confused sound once he felt the cold floor underneath him. Which got a couple octaves higher when Ironhide patted his minuscule head with his gigantic servo.

“Thank you, Ironhide, Arcee,” Lennox commented.

“Your welcome,” Ironhide rumbled, stepping away from the prisoner.

“W-what’s going on?” Anthony whimpered, his eyes wide.

No one answered as suddenly brilliant fluorescent lights turned on. The MECH spy winced and even the three NEST officials had to blink at the intense change. Only when their eyes adjusted, they were greeted with several giants forming a loose ring around them. Optimus stared, his lips tugged in the slightest of frowns, the only sign betraying his disapproval. However, the Autobot leader could not protest, as no humans were harmed, as promised. The same could not be said for poor Smokescreen, who was cradling his dented chest.

“Ow…” he moaned. “Did you have to hit so hard?”

“Sorry, rookie, had to make it authentic,” Ironhide replied gruffly.

The young Autobot only mumbled in Cybertronian before trudging away.

“You really thought a bunch of robots were going to eat you?” Simmons exclaimed as he walked over and plucked a wide-eyed Anthony off the floor. “You really are an idiot.”

“Y-you—you…” the MECH spy sputtered trying to get his tongue to work. Finally it snapped back into place with a glare. “You tricked me!”

“Yep. And it worked like a charm.” While the man only stared, Simmons flicked out his phone. “Fowler, did you get that?”

“Looking at satellite imagery right now,” the government agent replied. The consultant didn’t hear much noise, so he had no idea if Fowler was in a room filled with surveillance footage or in some
closest in the Pentagon. “I’ll get back to you in a few minutes.”

Simmons nodded and ended the call, turning his attention to his prisoner.

“Although you have been a great asset to the United States, NEST has no longer need of your services,” the man droned on as he ushered Anthony away. “There is a private plane all ready to go with your own... escorts. I hear Cuba is lovely this time of year.”

Anthony only stared in horror, and for a moment Simmons wondered if he preferred to be eaten by a robot. The Sector Seven agent made a deal that he could stay with NEST as long as he behaved. Which included turning a terrorist over to the US government. Besides, he really wanted Lennox to complete his side of the deal.

Only problem, that would be a lot harder without the boy.

“No, no, no! You can’t do this!” Anthony babbled. “This is against my rights!”

“Yeah, that went out the window when you became an enemy combatant of the United States.” Simmons grinned. “Goodbye, you psychopath.”

With that, he shoved the MECH spy until the arms of a pair of soldiers. Naturally the man tried to resist, flailing and cursing and screaming the whole way as the guards practically carried him out of the hanger. Leaving it in blissful silence at last.

Simmons turned around and walked over to Lennox.

“Feel free to say ‘thank you’ whenever you like,” the consultant gloated.

“After we find Darby,” the lieutenant colonel retorted.

“So we just wait?” Arcee demanded, stepping forward.

“No, we act,” Lennox corrected. “Once we confirm the location, we move in.”

“Except...?” Ironhide growled, knowing how the man was pointedly cutting off his sentence.

The man swallowed hesitantly and forced out... “You have to wait.”

The humans cringed with metallic roars and screeches of denial was his answer. Simmons rolled his eyes. He really wished Fowler was here. He seemed to have the best luck at negotiating with the aliens. To an extent, at least. Lennox hastily explained himself before he found himself at the receiving end of ten glares.

“MECH is a human terrorist organization. According to the treaty—”

“Frag the treaty!” Arcee screeched, making every being in room freeze.

She closed the distance between her and Lennox in a few strides. There was only a foot difference in height between them, but she leaned down so they could be eye-to-optic.

“Jack is one of us,” she all but said in a hiss. “He’s my partner. I won’t leave him again.”

Simmons watched the man’s Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed and let out a heavy sigh. He opened his mouth to speak, but never had the chance as a heavy tone rumbled above them.

“I was the one that made the decision to take Jack, Miko, and Rafael into Autobot custody,” the
Autobot leader, Optimus Prime, told as he stepped towards them. “In order to protect them.” The gentle giant leaned down to one knee, only to pause. Was that… hesitation? “Something… I failed to uphold. And a mistake, I do not intend to make again.” Suddenly those electric-blue optics glowed with a brilliant fire. “MECH has proved an enemy to the Autobots on more than one occasion. If you say they are stealing our weaponry—a direct violation of the treaty—and using it to threaten millions of innocents beings and one of our own—” Optimus Prime narrowed his optics. “—That is a crime I will not forget, nor forgive.”

Damn, he did make good speeches. But instead of eying the iron giant, Simmons focused on Lennox. The man sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. The consultant could hear the gears turning in the commander’s head—analyzing every scenario, predicting every outcome, calculating the possible casualties, knowing the sacrifices of his men. And that was all without the uproar from the Pentagon.

Part of Simmons wondered if his decision really mattered. The Autobots were an independent entity after all—aliens from another world. There was nothing stopping them from vaporizing each and every human that stood in their way. But they didn’t. Their mighty leader was kneeling next to the commander another race, waiting for his answer.

Lennox came to a decision.

“Epps, call the boys.”

Jack was slow to return to consciousness. He first felt himself being pressed against solid warmth, which rocked and swayed in a steady rhythm. The teenager furrowed his eyebrows as a dull ache reverberated from behind his eyes. He moaned at the pain, trying to move his limbs. They were locked in pace, sluggish from numbness. The warmth pressed tighter and the rocking motion quickened. Light burned across his eyelids. His eyes flickered open, only to see white.

"Wha...?" he slurred. Where...

"Be quiet," a voice above him snapped, but it was distorted and muffled.

Jack tried to blink to clear his vision, but he only saw shapes. Suddenly more voices joined the first.

"You found him!" a voice exclaimed, full of disbelief and a hint of concern. There was a gruff noise in response.

"This one's a handful."

Suddenly Jack's blurry surroundings panned and he winced as he was dropped into a hard surface. He hissed as it jolted his sore bones.

What was...

Jack blinked.

He screamed.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," Silas sneered down at him.

Jack believed he went to punch. He only remembered yelling in pain as a crushing grip appeared on his wrist, then the other.
"He's the same as his father," another voice—Jack flinched at hearing DeBiase—huffed.

"He's worse than his father," Silas retorted.

"What are you talking about?" the prisoner demanded.

He was ignored as Silas took both his wrists in one large, strong hand and snatched his chin. The boy hissed as his head was forced to turn, his crystal-blue eyes meeting solid black. The MECH leader hummed.

"I know I saw something," the man muttered.

"W-What?" Jack muttered. Once again he was ignored as Silas turned his attention DeBiase, standing a safe distance from the pair.

"Doctor, what determines eye color?"

Both DeBiase and Jack blinked in confusion.

After a moment of uncertainty, the doctor explained, "The amount of melanin in the iris. It's—"

"Can it change over time?"

"When you age, especially in your youth, but—"

"What about in a matter of hours?"

Now DeBiase looked at Silas if he grew a second head. "Erm, no."

The MECH leader only hummed and Jack’s skin crawled when he didn’t break eye contact. Looking into those lifeless black eyes sent chills down his spine. With a growl, the army brat jerked, forcing his head out of his captor’s grip. However, the hand around his wrists was holding so tight that there was no doubt it would bruise. Jack opened his mouth, about to question Silas’s sanity, only to freeze when the man went on.

"What would you do to find an anomaly in a patient?" the MECH leader demanded of the doctor.

"Run tests, of course," DeBiase answered, although still confused and hesitant.

"What kind?"

"It, um, depends on the symptoms and the diagnosis. You can’t just—"

"Do it."

DeBiase blinked. "Pardon, sir?"

"The tests. Run them. All of them."

"But that’s—"

The doctor’s protest was cut off by a hard, cold glare. The man flinched, and did not dare move or even speak a word as Silas said lowly, "Just because you don’t know how to pick up a gun doesn’t mean you aren’t one of my soldiers. When you joined MECH, you agreed to follow my command."

The man frowned and Jack eyed his torn expression, flicking between the boy and the terrorist. The
teenager wanted to protest, but his mind was still sluggish and he was just as confused as the doctor. What did Silas want from him now? Tests? As in medical tests? For what?

Jack stared at his godfather, trying to see what was going on in his head, pleading that he would go back to the man the boy knew. Instead of this monster in a man’s skin. DeBiase’s head fell into a nod.

“I’ll need blood samples,” he announced, and Silas nodded in approval.

It felt like lead fell into Jack’s stomach as his entire body went cold. Blood samples? What did he need that for? What was that going to—

“We found dark energon infused with your blood, Jack.”

Oh, no. No, no, no.

Jack started flailing, violently. He tried to pry his arms out of Silas’s grip, writhe away from him, and kicked his legs out, but the angle was all wrong.

“Get off of me!” Jack screamed, hissing and growling in his captor’s hold.

But he only came to the same conclusion as before—Silas was so much stronger and bigger than him. The MECH leader easily pinned him down, leaning his weight on his chest.

“You just never learn, do you, brat?” the extremist drawled.

“You won’t get away with this!” Jack screeched.

“And who’s going to come to your rescue, Jack?”

Hearing his name uttered after just a blunt, cold statement made the prisoner freeze. Shoulders still heaving from his struggles, he glared up at Silas, who sneered.

“No one knows where you are,” the terrorist continued. “How to find you. I could kill you, and no one would find your body. Or I could lock you up in the deepest, darkest hole I can find and keep you there. Until I find out what you are.”

Jack glared, even as chills crawled down his body. Images of the fight flashed across his vision. He remembered how the dark energon filled his veins, restoring him with renewed vigor. How it gave him strength. How Megatron’s will gave him the ability to fight. It allowed him to through Silas across the room without breaking a sweat, and he almost killed him. Jack wondered if he should have allowed Megatron to finish it.

With a snarl, Jack wrenched an arm free, immediately curling it into a fist. Before Silas could stop him, he sent into the man’s temple. He head snapped to the side with a grunt and hot satisfaction filled the boy’s chest.

“Not unless I beat up your ass again,” Jack snapped, trying to will the rest of his courage.

He tried not to shiver as the cold glare was replaced by a heated fury, Silas’s look feral. The army brat tried to use his newfound freedom to force the larger man off of him. He was so distracted he didn’t see the punch coming. Jack cried out as pain flared across his head and stars danced across vision.

He was turned over onto his belly, his arms being painfully pulled behind his back and fingers
tugged his hair as his face was pressed onto the cot. Jack squirmed, but the new position took away
the leverage he had gained. He hissed as suddenly his arms were jerked, almost yanking out of his
sockets.

Suddenly he felt fingers seizing the cuff of his sleeve, trying to force it up his arm and out of the way.
When it could only bunch up so much, there was a frustrated growl. Jack winced as suddenly the
cold, sharp metal of a knife touched his skin. It sliced into the jacked with a terrible ripping noise, the
edge nicking Jack’s arm. Flailing, the teenager tried to tuck his arm away, only for Silas to seize it
and twisting into an odd angle. Jack wailed.

“All right, now, Doc,” the MECH leader ordered.

“Just hold him still so the needle doesn’t cut the vein,” DeBiase replied, stepping forward.

Jack yelled as he felt the prick in the crook of his arm. He tried to flail, but both men were holding
the limb in place as the doctor filled the vial with his dark blood. And then another. And another.
The teenager hissed and winced and jerked at each once, but he was hopelessly pinned. The fingers
tangled in his hair scratched his scalp, patronizing, and he thought he felt a fake comforting touch on
his back. He could only tremble in rage and fear as DeBiase impeded the cold needle under his skin
over and over.

Each time Jack thought he would pull away, only for the doctor to return with another empty vial.
Each one made him more and more lightheaded, until eventually he could only lay limb on the cot.
Waiting for it to end.

Ten. DeBiase took ten blood samples from him.

“There. That wasn’t so bad now, was it?” Silas purred, petting his head.

Jack tried to jerk out of his hold, but it was hopeless. There was a sadistic chuckle above him and the
weight on his back shifted. The army brat flinched when there was a hot breath on his ear.

“You are mine now.”
A thick blanket of darkness had descended over the forest. It was a new moon tonight, and a blanket of clouds had rolled in. Sometimes the rustling of leaf and the creaking of wood if there was a strong enough wind.

The agent was grateful he didn’t spook easily, or else he would have disliked being sent out here. Or rather, dislike it even more. He hated sentry duty.

This far from civilization, they hardly had to worry about visitors, save for the occasional camper or hunter. They usually were easily turned away, and if they weren’t gullible, money or a gun to the face always did the trick. The agent doubted there would be visitors tonight, and it made him all the more bored. Not even his fellow sentry seemed to offer much company.

The man paced back and forth, trying to fight off the unconscious tugging at his mind. He remembered what happened to the last poor sod that fell asleep on the job. He didn’t want the same happening to him. So caught up in his struggle, he almost didn’t hear it. And when he did, he thought he was imagining it.

It was a distant, buzzing noise, that became louder and louder until a steady purr came from the forest. He squinted in confusion and exchanged uncertain glances with his partner, who just shifted his weight. The agent blinked, and then he saw it.

A white, fluorescent light shone forth from the dirt road like a shining beacon. Coming closer, along with the purring sound. Squinting through the darkness and the glare of the light, he realized what it was. A motorcycle, with a slender rider in leather in the saddle. The sight made him all the more confused.

What was a bike like that doing all the way out here? It was probably some kid joyriding in the backwoods. He raised his voice over the purr of the engine. The driver did not respond. He shouted again. The flashy motorcycle continued to speed forward.

The agent gritted his teeth and reached for the pistol strapped to his side. They had orders not to use force unless absolutely necessary, but maybe a more distinct sound would get the driver’s attention. He raised the gun and his finger slipped to the trigger, braced to squeeze.

Then the driver vanished.

The agent flinched back, his eyebrows meeting his hairline. What the—

Suddenly the motorcycle changed shape. There was a distinct sound of shifting gears as plating moved aside and wires rearranged. Limbs shot out and bright headlights were replaced by brilliant blue eyes. The pair of sentries only stared at the robot, jaws dropped open, stood frozen as it lunged towards them. Suddenly razor-sharp blades ejected from its arms, coming inches from the agent’s face. He yelped and stumbled back so rapidly he tripped on his own feet, falling onto his back.

“Stay down!” the robot barked, its low voice owning a metallic twang.

The men didn’t have to be told twice, raising their hands above their heads as the former motorcycle glared down at them. They were so distracted by its menacing shadow, they hardly heard another sound, this one a monstrous roar of a truck.

A bright red and blue semi pulled up behind the robot, coming to a halt with a high-pitched squeal of
tires. Behind it was a bright yellow Camaro with an army-green Humvee by its side. Then there was a line of more Humvees just like it, except each one had a turret. Manned by a stern-faced soldier in fatigues and body armor. The military convoy came to a pause behind the semi truck.

The passenger door swung open, revealing another soldier climbing out. The agent could automatically tell this was the commander, simply how he held his head high and crossed over to them in a controlled stride.

“I assume you are Colonel Bishop’s boys?” the man demanded, settling next to them.

“Don’t know who you’re talking about,” the agent snapped.

“How about Silas?”

His frown told all.

“Thought so.”

“What? Are you going to shoot us?” his partner demanded.

“No,” the commander replied, kneeling next to them, a smug, confident look on his face. “I’m going to arrest you for terrorist acts against the United States of America.”

Lennox watched as cuffs were slapped on the pair of MECH soldiers, who were protesting their treatment the entire time. Two down. Several dozen more across a three square mile compound.

Fowler was not at all happy when he heard about their plan. He even demanded to be groundbridged back, either to talk Lennox out of it or be on the frontlines himself. The lieutenant colonel insisted that the man stay in the Pentagon, and deal with the blowback NEST was certain to receive. Fowler ignored him and got on the first flight out of Washington D.C. Thank God it was a twenty-hour flight.

Lennox shifted in his body armor, the extra weight feeling natural and foreign at the same time. It had been a while since he had been in the field. As a captain, he had guided his men into enemy territory almost on a daily basis. It was because of his experience, especially with Transformers, he was chosen to be the field commander of NEST. However, as he was lieutenant colonel of General Bryce’s forces, that meant doing deskwork. A lot of deskwork.

“You sure about this, Will?” Epps’s voice came from behind him.

“I’ve made up my mind, Epps,” Lennox sighed, stepping towards Arcee. The Autobot noticed his approach and promptly transformed into a motorcycle.

“I know you cared about John—I liked the guy, too.” The lieutenant colonel decided to ignore the man following on his heels. “But you can’t feel responsible for his son—”

It was then Lennox grounded his teeth and spun around to face his friend, so suddenly that the man paused an inch away from him.

“What am I supposed to do, Rob? Just sit by and let Silas kill some innocent kid?” When Epps only frowned, he added, “Besides, this goes beyond what happened to John.”

“What happened to Darby is exactly why you are doing this.”

In no mood to continue the argument, Lennox stepped towards Arcee, but paused next to her.
“May I?” he asked, hands raised tentatively.

“You may,” Arcee allowed.

With that, the commander sunk into the saddle, though carefully and respectively. When he settled, he instantly decided it was the most comfortable saddle he ever sat in. He then moved his hands to the handles, but was slow, his fingers loosely wrapping around them. They, too, felt like a perfect fit. No wonder Jack liked this bike.

“Arcee and I will move on ahead,” Lennox announced. “Epps, you’re in charge until we link up in the compound.”

“Now explain to me how you expect to sneak into a heavily armed paramilitary base with an eight-foot-tall robot,” Epps drawled.

“I’m hoping they’ll be looking ones that are ten-foot-tall.” At his friend’s look, he added, “Optimus will lead the frontal assault from the north. Ironhide and his team is on standby from the west. Red smoke is the signal. And remember—”

“Autobots aren’t to use lethal, I know.”

It sounded like a teenager being given the same instruction a thousandth time, complete with an eyeroll. Deciding Epps could manage the task force by himself, Lennox was satisfied. He raised a hand, which his best friend took in a strong grip.

“Bring the rain.”

Jack decided if he ever went to a hospital again, so much as an annual, it would be far too soon. DeBiase (along with an armed escort of two soldiers, each twice the boy’s size) ushered him room to room, each one containing a different medical test. Some Jack didn’t even know existed, and he had been exposed to medical procedures all his life. One by one his borrowed clothes were stripped away, leaving him uncomfortably bare in his boxers.

It made it even worse that Silas oversaw most of the procedures, until he eventually left, either bored or to plot another scheme. Leaving Jack to be pricked and prodded like a pin cushion. DeBiase was oddly quiet through the examinations, except for muttering medical jargon under his breath. It made Jack more and more agitated, until the guards had to strap him down.

The army brat hissed and growled as he kicked and punched, screaming profanities—both human and Cybertronian—at the top of his lungs, but it was no use. They had their way every time, and Jack was defenseless. At one point the panic became so great, it reached out to the back of his mind. He begged, he didn’t why or for what, but there was no response. Only a solid, impenetrable wall.

Why? Why wasn’t he—

Then Jack realized.

_You petty piece of—_

“Send him back to the barracks,” DeBiase announced at last, in an all too casual tone as the teenager wrestled with his handlers.

“Not the luxury suite?” Jack snapped. “And here I thought I was _special._”
The doctor sighed, willing patience with the furious boy he had dealt with for the last several hours.

“Just… cooperate, Jack,” the man offered, handing over a change of clothes.

The prisoner didn’t hesitate to slip them on, but still glared with as much hatred as he could muster. It wasn’t hard.

“I thought the plan was to kill me,” Jack questioned.

“Plans change.”

“And you’re just going to let them get away with this?”

DeBiase frowned. “You’ll understand someday.”

“Don’t expect me to understand why you’re doing this,” Jack hissed. “Because I don’t. And I never will.”

Lennox decided he really liked the bike. Unlike the roar of most motorcycles, Arcee’s engine let out a quiet purr, even as she flew across the uneven ground. While the human could not see through the darkness beyond them, the Autobot seemed to know exactly where she was going, weaving between trees and patrols effortlessly. They cleared the distance in a matter of minutes, right on schedule.

The lieutenant colonel could only hope the others were on time, as well. They only had one shot at this.

Arcee’s headlights were switched off as she approached the compound at a careful pace. Lennox just made sure to keep his head down. The black lines of the chain-linked fence appeared before him all too suddenly and he couldn’t help but tense.

Suddenly there was a turning of gears and the motorcycle underneath him shifted. The saddle disappeared, and the man had to use will in his body not to cry out as he felt himself being thrown through the air. Before a scream could erupt from his throat, metal fingers wrapped around his middle, and he was just as quickly brought back to the ground.

They landed with a soft thud, on the other side of the fence.

Immediately the pair ducked behind a parked semi truck, which was big enough to hide them both. There was no shouts, no gunfire, no alarms. Lennox dared to give a sigh of relief. They made it.

“Well, that’s one way to get in,” the colonel panted, hands on his knees. He looked up to his temporary partner. “Now we wait for the others.”

Arcee nodded, her blazing optics focused on the compound before them.

“And then we find Jack.”

It was a long time since Optimus Prime had humans in his cab. Longer, since he had a cargo container attached to his alt mode. He did not complain, nor did his subordinates, filled with their own precious cargo. He sped forward, filling the forest with the mighty roar of his engine.

Optimus didn’t condone the spilling of blood of any sentient being, or any sort of violence for that matter. It was what drove his people, his planet, his home, apart. From Zeta Prime’s ruthless campaigns to Megatron’s cruel tyranny, both sides had committed their fair share of atrocities. To say
the cause was only the Decepticons’ carelessness was selfish.

Cybertron was gone now, and Primus had gifted him the wisdom of the Primes so he may guide his people. Optimus had guided them to a new planet, young and stable, containing all the resources they need, and valuable allies. It was their home.

The Prime would not let anyone with selfish intent ruin it for their own desires, whether they be Decepticon or not. Optimus Prime would redeem the mistakes of his predecessors, and his own.

The metal gate of the compound glowed in the pool of his headlights, and the Autobot leader sped forward with all his energy. He felt Sergeant Epps’s nails digging into the pleather of his steering wheel, but it was hardly noticeable. The semi truck plowed through the barrier as if it was nothing, horn blaring as loud it could.

Immediately startled screams and shouts assaulted his audios as humans dived out of his way and others called for the alarm. Sure enough, his frame was almost instantly pelted with minuscule projectiles. The high-velocity bullets bounced off the Prime’s thick armor harmlessly as he skidded to a stop with an ear-splitting screech of tires.

Epps barked something and instantly the doors of his hatch flew open. The rest of the Autobots unloaded their cargo as the military convoy pulled in behind them. The manned turrets took no hesitation to fire, raining bullets down on their startled enemies, giving cover for the scrambling NEST forces.

Even though, the MECH militiamen were quick to react. Fully armored soldiers dived behind cover, high-tech assault rifles in hand. Without warning, automated turrets came to life, barrels turning towards the intruders and unleashing hellfire of their own.

“’Bots, provide cover!” Epps shouted over the noise.

The vehicles did not hesitate, leaving doors open to form makeshift shields as they crawled across the open space. They moved at an angle, giving their human allies as much defense as possible, all the while proving them a line of fire on their opponents.

A strategy Optimus was aware his team did not particularly enjoy, preferring to step into the fight themselves. However, they knew this was a mission to protect all of their allies, and so they dutifully remained at their posts.

Bullets flew through the air like energon fire, exchanging sides and injuries at frightening speeds. Optimus noticed the NEST forces were aiming low, striking limbs and joints and occasionally hitting underneath vests. Meanwhile, MECH shot to kill, aiming for vitals. Protected by body armor and the Autobots, most of the lethal projectiles were deterred. Some were not.

Epps, posted on Optimus’s side, using the door as both a shield and a sniper’s nest, shouted another order.

“Hit the lights, Autobots!”

The Cybertronians did not have to be told twice. A trick they all possessed, but they hardly used it, mostly keeping in mind of the consequences. However, they accepted the open invitation, building up energy in their fields. The charge crackled across their frames, making the hairs of their human allies stand on end. Then as one, the Autobots released the built up energy, bursting their fields and sending the pulse in all directions.

Then the base went dark.
Jack was being guided down the hallway, an armed, fully-armed guard on either side of him. The adrenaline faded from the long day’s excitement, and the teenager was utterly exhausted. Soreness coursed through his body in waves, so fiercely he had to concentrate on stepping one foot in front of another. His head hung and his half-lidded eyes were trained on the floor. His thoughts drifted aimlessly, a buzz filling his mind. Whenever his stride became too sluggish, his escorts would bark or shove him forward.

Oh, how Jack wanted to sleep, and escape this awful nightmare. The teenager was so tired he almost didn't hear it. While it only confused him, he noticed both soldiers tense at the odd noise. It sounded like firecrackers. A lot of firecrackers. It was muffled and distant, telling it was coming from the outside. Jack knew instantly that something was wrong, if the anxiety of his guards was an indication. Then he realized what it was.

Gunfire.

His confusion only grew. It sounded like too much to be basic training. Something told Jack it wasn’t an internal feud. Silas’s followers had no reason to turn against him. The Autobots? No, the sound was all wrong. The pops of bullets instead of the hiss of energon. But who else would come? It had to be—

Jack rushed forward in a blink of an eye. Only for one of the guards to snatch the collar of his shirt. He gagged but was not deterred as he tried to rip free from the painful grip on his arms. It was no use.

“HELP!” the prisoner screamed at the top of his lungs, clinging on to the desperate hope that someone—the NEST soldiers—would hear him.

He was immediately disciplined with a punch to the head. Before Jack could crumple to the floor in pain, the guards half-dragged, half-carried him down the corridor. The army brat fought every step of the way, trying to break free, trying to call attention.

“Let me go! Let me go!” Jack growled through gritted teeth.

“T’m getting tired of your little attitude,” one of the guards retorted, yanking the teenager’s arm and throwing him against the wall.

Jack wheezed and moved to continue his struggles, only freeze at a distinct click and cold touch on his stomach. Instantly his muscles locked up at the gun pressed against his shirt, but he still glared defiantly at his captor. The militiaman sneered down at him.

Suddenly the light flickered out, cloaking them with darkness. While Jack blinked, the two guards flailed, cursing. Then they heard at the same time. A sharp, musical whistle.

All three turned their heads at the same time. Jack instantly saw Colonel Lennox crouching on the frame of the window he had pried open. The MECH soldiers immediately locked onto the barrel of the gun glaring down at them.

Suddenly claps of thunder echoed through the hallway. There were strangled grunts and Jack felt something wet on his face. The men harassing him disappeared, replaced by dull thuds.

“You okay?” Lennox asked, not hesitating to climb through the window.

Jack remained in his spot, not aware he was shaking. He used his sleeve to wipe his face, all the
while telling himself do not look down.

“Y-yeah,” the teenager stammered, trying to keep his voice steady but failed. “W-what took you so long?”

“Sorry, hit some traffic on the way here.”

The boy let out a hollow chuckle. Lennox gave him a once over. Once he determined that Jack was in one piece—and that he could walk—he grabbed the teen’s arm and ushered him along.

“Come on, we’re leaving,” the lieutenant colonel announced.

“How are we going to get out of here?” Jack asked.

“Got some help.”

The boy opened his mouth to ask what he meant, only to hear a familiar creaking of gears. Jack instantly snapped his head towards the window.

“Arcee!” he cried.

His guardian was crouching outside the building, peering through the opening with a warm, gentle smile.

“Hey, partner,” Arcee greeted.

Jack’s heart fluttered. How long had they been apart? It felt like a lifetime. And the boy wanted to apologize for every second of it. He wanted to tell her that he was a fool. That he was out of line and was terribly selfish. He wanted his best friend back.

The teenager opened his mouth to say as such, he didn’t care if it wasn’t the time or place, only to be cut off by another series of cracks. Followed by clings as bullets ricocheted off of Arcee’s armor. The Autobot immediately hunched, raising her arms and clamping down her armor to close the vulnerable gaps, as a rain of projectiles poured from assault rifles somewhere out of view. Arcee whirled around, wings up, turning her back to her allies and facing the threat. When she was greeted with another volley, she ducked her face out of the line of fire, shooting her glare back at Lennox and Jack.

“I’ll handle them,” she assured in that controlled, serious tone. “You two get out of here.”

“Right,” Lennox nodded.

He gently took Jack’s arm, tugging him down the hallway—away from Arcee.

“W-wait!” the boy yelped, glancing at Arcee. Only for the Autobot to dive out of sight, letting out a metallic screech, followed by fearful screams of full-grown men and distinct thuds.

“The ‘Bots are covering our escape. We have to leave now,” Lennox commanded, hurrying along, keeping a firm hold on the reluctant teenager.

Jack could only follow, even though he watched as he was dragged farther away from Arcee.

The night was filled with thunder-like claps and whistles of ammunition, along with the screams and barks of soldiers. Flashes of light danced across the compound, some more brilliant than others.
From his vantage point in the back of the battlefield (a view he was unused to and uncomfortable with), Optimus determined the tide of battle was swayed to neither side. The EMP pulse had successfully deactivated the enemy defense systems and communications, along with any of their vehicles. However, it was not a discriminate attack, as it had disabled the NEST soldiers as well. They compensated by using night vision goggles, which were not hindered by the pulse, but MECH possessed the same technology.

The same amount of ammunition crossed the field, and the same amount of soldiers fell. A brave few ventures out of their cover to carry or drag their comrades to safety, sometimes stepping into the line of fire themselves. Each side was losing numbers, and neither side showed signs of surrendering.

Epps threw a flare into the center of the chaos, the red smoke in full view of all eyes—and optics.

The reply was instantaneous, as if they were waiting eager for the moment to finally come. Metallic roars of engines sounded over the noise, several brilliant beams of headlights shone from outside the compound.

Ironhide burst through the west gate much like Optimus had, but unlike his leader, instantly transformed once clearing the compound. He let out a battle cry, so fierce that several MECH (and NEST) soldiers flinched at the harsh sound. The rest of the Autobot’s team followed suit, breaching the barrier and switching into their bipedal mode.

Ironhide shifted his arms into twin fusion cannons, sending superheated bolts of energon into the nearest buildings, collapsing them into rubble with plumes of smoke. Smokescreen and Mirage found a collection of helicopters and even a few planes, opening fire on the flyers. The vehicles fell like dominoes in eruptions of fire.

Sideswipe and Sunstreaker switched their pedes to wheels, dancing around the compound with deadly grace. They laughed as they sliced any obstacles and vehicles in their way—Sideswipe cutting down the middle of a Humvee, effectively turning it into halves, much to the awe and terror of the MECH occupants.

Bulkhead and a couple other human Humvees drove across the battlefield, filled with soldiers that peppered the enemy with fire before retreating. Bumblebee buzzed around the compound like his namesake, flashing his headlights or doing turns so tight it threw dust in MECH soldiers’ faces. Even Arcee had joined the battle, knocking out the assaulters with a few swift blows and leaping away before the humans could retaliate.

The energon in Optimus Prime’s veins became hot. He would not sit idly by while his people fought and endangered their lives for their allies. Not while their new home was at stake. With a word of warning, Epps and the captains sheltering in his cab jumped out.

The Guardian Knight of Primus transformed and charged into the battle.

Jack nearly jumped out of skin as suddenly the walls around him shuddered, violently.

“What was that?” he yelped.

“Ironhide,” Lennox answered in a flat, unimpressed tone, as if it was typical.

The teenager opened his mouth to reply, only for the ground to tremble beneath his shoes. There was
a series of distant rumbles and explosive claps, muffled by the concrete around the pair. What the heck was going on out there?!

“If that doesn’t keep them busy, I don’t know what will,” Lennox commented drily as they moved in a fast, hurried pace.

Jack realized they made it to the warehouse he had snuck out of earlier. However, unlike before, it was dark and devoid of life, the garage door even closed. The teenager’s skin prickled as he realized the gunfire was louder here, coming from the other side of the walls. Along with reverberating booms that rattled the rafters.

He followed on Lennox’s heels as the man said, “We should have enough cover to—shit!”

The lieutenant colonel looked around a piles of crates, only to be greeted with the barrel of an assault rifle. Jack yelped as he was shoved back, just as a burst of bullets filled the space he just occupied. He pressed his back to the wall, out of sight of the shooter; Lennox’s shoulder dangerously close to the corner’s edge. The soldier adjusted his hold on his pistol as the assault suddenly stopped.

“We have the place surrounded!” Lennox shouted, filling his voice with authority. “Put your weapons down—” He was interrupted by another burst of fire. The commander flinched back behind his cover. “Worth a shot.”

“What do we do?” Jack demanded.

The soldier answered him by twisting around the stack of crates and firing several shots at their assailter. Not one, but two bursts of fire was the reply. Each deafening sound made Jack cringe. He wondered what was worse—being in the middle of a giant alien battle or being in the middle of a shoot out. His body apparently couldn’t tell the difference, his heart beating faster and adrenaline coursing through his veins.

“Give us the boy!” one of the MECH goons demanded.

“Put down your weapons!” Lennox retorted.

The exchange of bullets continued. Jack didn’t know how long he stood there, terrified for his life and utterly useless, until there were heavy thuds followed by suppressive silence. The teenager let out a shuddering breath he didn’t know that he was holding and unlocking his tight muscles one by one. Before he had a chance to regain himself, Lennox snatched his arm and dragged him through the warehouse faster than before.

Which turned to be a grave mistake, as they stepped forward only to hearing a clinking sound at their feet. Jack locked onto the sphere the same time Lennox screamed.

“Grenade!”

Something solid slammed into the teenager, brutally sending him with the closest wall. He yelped as his shoulder rammed into the hard concrete, barely processing that Lennox’s body was protectively wrapped around his.

Without warning, an almighty noise assaulted Jack’s hearing and his vision was filled with black dust. He felt something hit his body, Lennox shifting to keep his balance and the army brat snapping his head to the side like there was a slap to his face. He coughed as a strong and harsh scent filled his mouth and nostrils, choking him.

Then just as suddenly, there was silence. Jack blinked rapidly, trying to adjust his vision, but he was
only reward with something obstructing his view, his eyelashes brushing against it. There was a piercing, high-pitched ring in his ears, drowning out a muffled sound.

“W-w-what?” Jack asked, in a trembling voice barely above a whisper.

“—ou alright?” Lennox’s voice came into focus at the man pulled back and seized the boy’s shoulders, so he had to look into the soldier’s eyes.

He could only nod, his tongue unable to move. A haze now lingered in the tight space, so thick Jack had to squint to see Lennox less than a foot away from him. He shifted, trying to adjust his balance, only to feel something wet on his arm. The boy glanced down, only to blanch at a red smear across his arm and his side was stained.

“Is—is that my blood?” he gasped.

“No,” Lennox replied through gritted teeth.

It was then Jack glanced down, locking on to the ugly gash, oozing dark blood, on the colonel’s side, only to be covered from view from the man’s hand. It was then what actually happened clicked. Lennox had protected him from the grenade. A boy he hardly knew, yet he had taken the brunt of the blast and the resulting debris from it. The teenager wanted to say something—anything—only to stop when he saw movement in the corner of his eye.

“Lennox!” Jack cried in warning.

The lieutenant colonel turned around, only to receive a violent punch to the temple from Silas. The man grunted as he was sent stumbling back, but recovered quickly. Lennox retaliated with a sucker punch of his own, only for the MECH leader to catch it and twist the limb into a painful angle. The madman followed it up with a knee to the stomach, forcing the NEST commander to double over.

Jack could only watch helplessly as the pair of military commanders grappled one another. In the limited space between the stacked equipment of the warehouse, they traded punches and kicks, occasionally landing a headbutt or shoving the other away. There was no glint of a knife or gun, each man disarming the other before any weapon could be used, but it was obvious each movement was precise and calculated. Laced with the intent to kill. Lennox had already been caught in a deadly headlock twice.

Heart hammering in his chest, Jack scanned his surroundings, trying to find something he could use. If he just stepped into the fight, he would only be sent to the floor in a matter of seconds. If his last fight with Silas was any indication. The teenager’s gaze fell onto one of the MECH soldiers. His stomach twisted, trying to not too look at the still open eyes. Instead, Jack reached for the belt, pulling on the pistol attached there, cringing as his fingers brushed again a wet, sticky substance. Again, he put it to the back of his mind as he gave the handle a few tugs until it came free.

The metal was cold in his palm and he was oddly aware of its weight. It was lighter than he expected, but heavier than the toy guns he played with. He was brought back to the last time he saw his father, that they had gone to the local shooting range. The man had allowed his son, only twelve-years-old, fire from the hunting rifle a few times, on the condition he did not tell his mother. Jack wasn’t planning on telling her about this, either.

Swallowing he raised the weapon, wrapping both around it to keep it steady. It didn’t help much. The shaking barrel could not lock on to Silas, who was writhing and shifting against Lennox. Jack
tried to remember the high he had felt in their last battle, how Megatron’s bloodlust driven his actions. He remembered how it terrified him, how easily the warlord could change his entire mind. He pushed the Decepticon away, and Silas had captured him.

Now people were dying because of him.

Jack tightened his grip. He had to fix this. All of this. It was his responsibility to end it.

Lennox was wrestling with Silas again, the MECH leader trying to keep his grip on the NEST commander. However, Lennox was squirming too much for the madman to gain purchase. He eventually let out a frustrated roar and shoved with all his might, sending the lieutenant colonel’s head into a metal crate. Lennox slumped onto the floor with a groan. Silas turned his attention to the army brat.

Jack aimed low and fired.

There was a deafening clap of thunder, along with a snarl, as hands wrapped around his wrists. The teenager hissed as his grip was forced down, sending the bullet ricocheting harmlessly off the floor. Jack tried to keep his hold on the pistol, only for the weapon to be pried out of his hands.

A foreign limb wrapped around his throat, a crook of an elbow painfully pressing against his jugular. Jack flailed, only to freeze at the cold touch against his temple and the hot air against his ear.

“And here I thought you didn’t have it in you,” Silas chuckled in his ear.

“Jack!” Lennox cried, jumping back to his feet. He snatched his fallen pistol, raising it to train it on the terrorist hiding behind the teenager.

“I wouldn’t do that, Colonel.” The MECH leader pressed the gun into Jack’s skull in emphasis, eliciting a whimper. He stepped back, dragging his prisoner with him. “Now, Jack and I will be taking our leave.”

“Silas, don’t—”

“What? Kill him? What’s one more death to the American government? You would know a thing or two about that, wouldn’t you.”

Lennox glared, even though his voice calmed to a level tone. “I know you’re angry about what happened to your team, Colonel, but you’re not honoring their deaths this way.”

“And what about the three hundred American lives lost in Qatar? That was only one robot. Imagine we controlled an army.”

“You’re insane,” Lennox breathed, shaking his head in disbelief.

Jack was only confused. American lives? Qatar? Robot?

“W-what are you talking about?” the teenager demanded. A chuckle in his ear was his reply.

“After all this time, and you still don’t know? I guess they wouldn’t tell you. They have to keep their precious classified information secret. Do you want to know one, Jack?”

Suddenly Lennox’s eyes went wide with horror. “Bishop, no—”

“A SOCCENT Forward Operations Base intercepted a helicopter that was trespassing in US military air space,” Silas told, though his voice was smug. “It was escorted to the base, where soldiers on
sight prepared to remove the occupants. They were only greeted with a giant robot, instead.”

A chill crawled down Jack’s spine. A Transformer. But why—

“It destroyed the base. Destroyed every piece of US property and everybody in it.”

No, not just a Cybertronian. A Decepticon.

“Hmm… now when did that happen?” Silas hummed, his deep voice far too cheerful.

“Shut. Up,” Lennox hissed, but of course he was ignored as the MECH leader gasped with realization.

“Ah, over three years ago. Hmm… July 4th? No… 3rd?”

Jack froze, every single muscle in his body locking up and going rigid.

“Yes, July 3rd. Does that sound familiar to you, brat?”

The army brat had that date ingrained in his mind for the rest of his life. It was supposed to be the best day of his life, only to be the worst.

“I believe that’s when your father died, isn’t it?”

Silas’s drawl dropped to a sickly sweet purr, but Jack didn’t hear him, his mind had all but retreated from reality.

“I… I lost my—my dad died, in war, three years ago. He was killed by a roadside bomb while out on patrol in Qatar.”

“I served with him.”

“This is the signal that penetrated the Pentagon’s firewalls two weeks ago. The same one that had infiltrated the network three years ago. During an attack on a US Army base in Qatar.”

The Decepticons destroyed a US Army base in Qatar.

The base Johnathan Darby was stationed in.

The Decepticons killed his father.

Jack wasn’t even aware that his body was trembling. He wasn’t aware that Silas was smirking victoriously against his ear, or Lennox cursing the ex-colonel’s name.

No, no, no.

It couldn’t be true.

His father died serving his country. He died as a hero that Jack could never be. He wasn’t a victim, thrown in a crossfire in an alien war. A war he hadn’t fought in.

It couldn’t be true.

Jack’s blood into ice. The dark energon in his veins froze. He suddenly found it hard to breathe. He gasped desperately, shoulders heaving, but no air filled his lungs. His trembling only increased and his heart raced faster. He wasn’t even aware Silas was forcing him backwards, away from Lennox.
The MECH leader was whispering to him, but he didn’t hear a word. His mind was numb to his surroundings, only circling around a single train of thought.

Megatron had murdered his father.

Jack blinked, to find his vision blurry and unfocused. He hardly noticed the flicker of movement in the corner of his vision, as a shadow moved closer to them with surprising stealth despite her large size. Without warning, a high-pitched, metallic screech filled his hearing.

Something *hard* slammed into him, sending him flying. He landed on the floor, staring up at the rafters above him. What just—? Hearing hisses and growls, the teenager quickly rolled over onto his stomach, though grunting at the soreness.

He was greeted with Arcee. She looked feral, wings up and plating bristling and a savage snarl on her faceplates. Silas was pinned underneath her claws. Apparently he was wiser than to fight a being larger and stronger than him, as he lay still, glaring up at the furious Autobot above him. He let his subordinate take care of the problem.

Jack didn’t know where it came from. Suddenly a high-pitched, staticky buzz filled the air as a compressed beam of energy shot through the warehouse. The boy screamed, warning his partner. In the same instant, Arcee leaped away from the attack, narrowly avoiding the beam from striking her side. No doubt the attack would have killed her, if it didn’t reek havoc her systems first.

She skidded away to safety beside Lennox, and realized too late that her prisoner was free. Allowing Silas to sprint away, vanishing out of sight. Lennox roared and Arcee lunged, just as another EMP beam tore through the air.

This time Jack felt something course through him, buzzing throughout his entire body until he felt in his *bones*. A ear-splitting screech came from somewhere nearby. Suddenly the world tilted, and Jack felt gravity capture his twitching body. Only for strong, slender arms to catch him, wrapping around him protectively. He looked up into blue optics.

“Jack…”

The teenager fell into unconsciousness in his guardian’s arms.
Staff Sergeant Johnathan Darby was a commander in the US Army Rangers. It was his responsibility to lead his men behind enemy lines, and to bring them home. After decades of combat on the other side of the world, he had adapted a rugged look.

His dark brown hair was cut short to his scalp and his whiskers were untrimmed, his beard unshaven but not thick. His emerald green eyes always matched his mood, even that occasional, serious frown he would wear. Broad shouldered, thick muscles, and standing 6’3”, he was an intimidating figure. His physique was thanks to a strict, vigorous training regime that he went through daily, whether at home or abroad.

On the field, he was serious and disciplined, able to think and react quickly. He was charming and caring to his men, and his troops looked up to him. At home, he was far more relaxed. The mask of the commander would be removed, leaving a mischievous, good-natured man. John could lighten the darkest moods with his innate sense of humor, occasionally pulling a clever prank if the opportunity revealed itself.

But like all men, he had his flaws, the stress of his career making him alert and short-tempered at all times. He flinched at loud noises and cringed whenever he heard a wail. His voice rose quickly whenever he was annoyed or frustrated, a trait June had called his “army bark.” She was the only one who could calm her husband’s fits.

John was careful not to direct his negative feelings to his family, instead always finding time to spend with his son. Even as he wasn’t on the same continent.

“I wish you were here,” Jack whined. A choppy picture of his father’s face, even in the living room, did not count.

“I know, son,” Dad replied, giving one of his warm, reassuring smiles. “We’re wrapping up things here, and then I’ll come home.”

“What are you doing, anyway?”

“Classified, Jack. I could tell you, but then I’ll have to kill you.”

The son huffed in a chuckle and rolled his eyes. Suddenly there was an impatient shout behind Dad, and it was the man’s turn to roll his eyes.

“Yeah, yeah, Lennox, you can talk to your girls,” the Ranger drawled to another figure off-screen. He turned back to his soon. “I have to go. I’ll see you soon.” Jack nodded and replied. “I love you, too, son. Happy birthday.”

Jack opened his eyes. He instantly recognized the white fluorescent lights and the steady deeps of machinery. He groaned.

“I hate hospitals,” he sighed.
Jack shifted onto his elbows, sighing in relief to find his arms free, only for soreness to radiate across his body in waves. He hissed at the steady throb behind his eyes.

“You and me both,” a familiar voice drawled, and Jack glanced up only to blink.

“F-Fowler?” he gasped.

The liaison sat in a chair pushed against the wall, legs crossed and a thick book still in his hand. His posture was relaxed, breaking military discipline to slouch against the back of the chair. His jacket was sprawled across the empty chair next to him. He had obviously been there for a while.

“What… what happened?” Jack asked, his voice slurring.

“You got caught in the blast radius in one of MECH’s fancy gadgets,” Fowler answered. “The stress of the electric shock knocked you out. Doctors say there shouldn’t be any permanent damage, though.”

At first Jack was confused at his words, then it all came flooding back. MECH. They kidnapped him. Then the Autobots came to save him. Along with NEST, everyone. Lennox had put his life in danger to protect the boy, but he couldn't stop the soldier that fired that… EMP gun, or whatever it was. It wasn't strong enough to kill the boy, but a force that concentrated would do damage to his body.

Then Jack remembered.

“S-Silas? Is he…?” the teenager trailed off, not knowing how to finish the question. Fowler shook his head.

“He got away,” the man sighed. “Used the chaos to slip a helicopter out of the compound.”

The agent’s voice was filled with bitterness and frustration. Jack’s stomach twisted. All of that, for nothing. Silas had escaped, to continue his mad schemes, while… The boy’s heart skipped a beat.

“Acree! Is she okay?” the army brat demanded.

“She’s fine. She and the rest of the Autobots just got some scrapes. If wasn't for them we would have more casualties—”

Fowler cut off, realizing his mistake, but the damage was done. Jack’s blood turned cold. More casualties, as in—

All that gunfire he had heard, it was US forces, fighting. For him. How many people had gotten hurt, gotten killed? The teenager’s chest twisted painfully. No, he wasn't worth that. He was just some insignificant child that didn't know anything. He caused more problems than solved them. He wasn’t worth dozens of American lives, and the families that—

Fowler must have picked up on Jack’s somber mood, because he assured quickly, “The boys knew what they were signing up for when they joined the operation. MECH is a terrorist organization and Silas is a threat to national security. I had no doubt those men would volunteer to do it again.”

Jack swallowed. “I thought NEST fought Decepticons, not… humans.”

Fowler frowned. “That’s true.” When the teenager looked down at his lap, he added, “We can argue we had jurisdiction to be there. There was certainly enough Cybertronian tech and energon to support that.”
The army brat blinked, not sure if he heard the man correctly. “Wait... what?”

“It looks like MECH was trying to build their own little factory. Found a storage of energon and a laboratory. It looks like they were trying to reverse engineer the Cybertronian weaponry—we think.”

*Which would of have disastrous consequences, as Jack stared at the deadly symbol plastered on each barrel.*

*Biohazard.*

MECH had been experimenting with stolen technology, and they were free to continue their scheme. Jack swallowed.

“Silas got away because of me... I-I tried, but I couldn’t do it.”

“Don’t do that to yourself,” Fowler replied, more gentle than chiding. “You wouldn’t. And it’s not your job. If anything, we’re all just as guilty for what happened yesterday.”

The statement made the boy blink. He heard the remorse and venom in the man’s voice, his eyes narrowed in a glare even though there was nothing in front of him. His arms were crossed over his chest defensively.

“What do you mean?” the army brat dared to ask, and he was answered with a sigh.

“Silas, or should I say, Leland Bishop, has been on the terrorist watch list for years. And he’s only there because we put him there.” The man ignored Jack’s confused squint, continuing, “We trained him—how to kill, how to avoid detection, how to operate.”

Then the boy remembered. Lennox and Silas expertly training blows, the same *moves*, as if—

“Silas was ex-military,” Jack realized.

“Navy SEAL,” Fowler clarified. “He was commander of one of our most elite special operations teams.”

“What happened?”

The government agent let out a long sigh and shifted his weight. “9/11.”

The blunt reply made Jack cringe. He wondered how two simple numbers could bring such agony. However, he listened as the man went on, “It triggered the greatest man hunt in history.” Fowler paused and apparently decided to skip details, rather saying bluntly, “Colonel Bishop and his team were sent to intercept a messenger. The mission was to capture the target and interrogate him to lead us to him. It started as a standard op—no resistance, dropped in, kicked the door down.” Another sigh and uncomfortable pause. “It was a trap. The compound was rigged to explode. ...Bishop was the only one to survive.”

Jack felt something in his chest twist. He hated Silas with every fiber in his being—he still hated Silas. But he felt a twang of pity. Not for the terrorist, but for Colonel Bishop. Comrades on the frontlines were like brothers. Losing his entire team... No wonder he went mad.

“Bishop was *ordered* never to speak of the operation again,” Fowler continued. “We couldn’t risk it leaking out. Obviously, the colonel didn’t appreciate that. He demanded compensation for his team. He was refused. Then Project Damocles started up ahead of schedule.” At Jack’s questioning glance,
the man explained, “It was a space weapons initiative, allowing the United States military to target anything and anyone in the world. It was supposed to decrease causalities of American troops. Bishop had other plans.

“He hacked into the satellite—with a laptop, by the way—and it trained it only Washington D.C. Threatened he would fire it, if his ransom wasn’t paid. Special forces found him and put a gun to his head to force him to shut down the project. He was arrested and tried. Then… he just disappeared.”

Fowler closed his eyes, sighing through his nose. “One year later, Silas appeared on our watch list, leading a militia he put together, called MECH. And, well… you know the rest.”

“So Silas is a terrorist all because he lost his men?” Jack concluded, unable to hide the anger from his voice.

“Grief does strange things to a man. Besides, I’m sure he already had his grievances.”

“Like DeBiase was bitter about Dad?”

Fowler blinked at him. “Knew someone there?”

“You could say that…” Jack narrowed his eyes to a glare. “I thought he was crazy. He said Dad died for nothing. But then Silas…”

He trailed off, his voice cracking as the horrible memory flashed before his eyes. Of Silas’s smug tone, enjoying his prisoner’s misery. The boy’s thoughts were interrupted by Fowler’s heavy sigh.

“Lennox told me what happened after I got back from D.C.,” the man said. “I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

“Were you ever going to tell me?”

“…No.”

The boy shook his head in disbelief. “Why?”

“Other than the fact it was classified, and we couldn’t exactly tell your mother that her husband was killed by an alien technology that until then, we didn’t know was a threat?”

“Who else knew?”

“Just me and Lennox. Epps, too.”

Jack couldn’t help the bubble of rage that filled his chest, bristling. “So you all were just going whisper and tiptoe around me? Treat me like some little kid that didn’t know any better?”

“I didn’t know until recently, when Lennox told me after we caught you at the Pentagon—which, by the way, we classified as a Decepticon aggression rather than two brats playing Spy Kids.” Jack frowned, but before he could retort, Fowler added, “We didn’t tell you because you had already grieved. There was no sense putting you through that again.”

The boy swallowed and looked down at his lap. He felt a familiar, horrible feeling creep into his chest, but he stamped it back down. He tried to focus on the frustration instead. That usually kept it at bay.

“Silas knew,” he accused.
“Bishop has an unlimited number of contacts and resources—and he’s smart. He probably dug into your family history and pieced it together.”

While Jack was in the dark, none the wiser. Because the government couldn’t bear to release its secret. It couldn’t confess its mistake, meddling with a wrathful and vengeful race. The boy realized that was just a hint of Silas’s bitterness. But he didn’t understand.

“How… why would the Decepticons just… attack an operations base?” Jack asked. That was all he could say, and even that hurt.

“…They weren’t after the base, but the network,” Fowler explained after a heavy pause. “They… were looking for… something.”

It clicked almost immediately. No, not something. Someone.

A single shudder coursed through his body and suddenly his throat hurt as he fought back a scream. Did he know?

“And now Megatron is after me,” Jack muttered darkly.

He gritted his teeth. He didn’t understand it himself. He didn’t know how to describe it. Jack could feel him. The boy could hear his thoughts. But the tyrant’s mind was too complicated. The only thing that he understood was—

He still remembered it, that rush that filled him every time he took over his mind. He thought it was adrenaline. Bloodlust even. But then he remembered. What Jack felt, every time before he succumbed to Megatron’s will.

Hate.

There was a heavy silence as Jack tried to grasp everything that had happened and the dark information he had been told. He felt his emotions, twisting and churning his in stomach, tearing his heart apart. Oh, how he wished this nightmare would be over. That he would wake up, and learn everything he had been through for the last two months was all just a bad dream.

Jack blinked, and sure enough, he was still in the hospital bed at Diego Garcia, connected to several different machines. At least he wasn’t in cuffs this time. Meanwhile, Fowler was processing the information he had been told, adding it to what little he already knew.

“Jack, there’s a way we can try to remove the dark energon,” he said slowly, hesitantly, and the boy instantly snapped his neck. He trained his wide-eyed gaze on the man, and he wondered if he heard him correctly.

“H-how?” the teen demanded.

Fowler told him about their idea of using dialysis. A common, nonfatal operation that could be the solution to their problem.

“Do you think it would work?” Jack asked.

“It’s worth a shot,” the man replied hopefully.

The army brat swallowed the lump in his throat and balled the sheets in his fists. “I don’t want Megatron in my head anymore.”
The agent nodded. “I’ll set it up with the doctor. In the meantime,” he added, crossing the room, “there’s some people that want to see you.”

Jack raised a confused eyebrow. Fowler smiled at him while he opened the door. The teenager gasped in surprise and his depression was instantly replaced by relief and joy.

“Mom!” he cried.

The woman automatically closed the distance between them, wrapping her arms around him in a tight, crushing hug. Jack wheezed at the dull pain it caused, but he didn’t care to complain, instead returning it with his own bear hug. Looking over her shoulder, he noticed Miko and Raf filing in, just as relieved to at last see their friend. Fowler promptly slipped out of the room, leaving them privacy.

“You’re okay.” Mom breathed against his neck, like it was dream turned into reality. She held him even tighter, muffling her cries against his shirt. “You’re okay…”

“Yeah,” Jack replied, in a soft, reassuring whisper. “I’m okay.”

He stayed with his family for a long time after that.

Jack spent the next couple days in the medical wing, several different doctors fussing over him. They monitored his vitals—which they deemed were fine—and did a number of tests (which made him cringe, but they were careful when they noticed his discomfort). The head physician deemed there was no lingering damage from the electrocution, or any signs of trauma for that matter. The man expressed his curiousness, how he should little sign of injury, especially after the boy told him the details of his capture.

Jack knew why, his veins feeling warm as the dark energon traveled to every cell of its host. He was relieved when the doctor declared he was fit enough to continue with the procedure.

The dialysis was a surreal experience, but after he had been through Jack supposed it was rather insignificant. It was absurd to begin with, as the doctors had to pinch up his skin in order to get access to much blood as possible. Two needles were inserted—one to draw the blood, one to return it. The machine hummed to life and Jack couldn’t help but feel light-headed, watching the blood—his blood—seep into the tubing.

He decided not to comment how it seemed darker, but returned lighter shade. The heavy weight that had been pressing against his chest—and his mind—lifted ever so slowly. Jack dared to breathe, light and relieved.

It was working.

Mom stayed with the boy during the procedure, and offered him distraction. Jack was grateful, as it didn’t seem like long had passed when the procedure was finished. He lingered in his room another day to ensure there was no lasting effects, Miko and Raf keeping him company. Finally, the teenager was discharged from the medical wing and allowed to leave.

He was shaky at first after being bedridden for so long, but it only took a few minutes to regain his motor function. Jack immediately used his newfound freedom to return to the place that only a few days ago, he vowed never to step into again. Miko and Raf were with him when he stepped into Hanger E, the Autobots’ personal quarters, yet he still stiffened when he felt ten pairs of optics settle
on him. He decided to ignore it, as there was only one he cared about.

Arcee closed the distance between them in a heartbeat, and immediately began fussing over him like a mother hen. Jack didn’t realize how much he missed her overprotectiveness. Trying to come up with assurances to calm his partner, her words caught him off guard, as she said something he never thought she was capable of.

“I was scared,” Arcee murmured, so that only he could hear. “I was scared I was going to lose you.”

Jack swallowed, not knowing how to assure that, not when he was scared himself. He decided it wasn’t worth hiding it.

“I was, too,” he admitted. “That I would never see you again. I was afraid you hated me.”

The guardian shook her head in disbelief. “I could never.”

“But how I acted—”

“You were scared, and upset. You needed time.”

Jack nodded. “I… I’ve had enough time. I want to stay here, with you. I want to be with the Autobots again.” After a pause, he dared to say, “I don’t want to be Megatron’s toy anymore.”

Arcee’s optics turned fierce. “I’ll never let him hurt you again.”

The teenager gave a half-hearted smile, and he didn’t know why. Maybe because he was with his fiery partner again, at long last.

Jack was nervous. He rubbed his sweaty palms against his jeans, and focused on keeping his breathing steady. Already he felt his skin prickling underneath that scrutinizing gaze. It felt like he was going into a job interview, but a part of him knew it wasn’t. A part of him felt like it was worse. Lennox had given him a warning, that it needed to be done, but he could take a break if he was uncomfortable. The lieutenant colonel even gave him advice how to make it smooth as possible. Jack was still nervous, but he forced himself to appear calm as the man approached him.

“So we finally meet face-to-face. Jack Darby, right?”

“Yes, sir,” the boy nodded.

“Seymour Simmons,” the man introduced, raising a hand.

Jack hesitantly took it, even as his stomach knotted and horrible images flashed across his eyes. He shoved them down.

“You… were part of Sector Seven,” the teenager surmised hesitantly. Simmons nodded.

“And you’re bad-things-happen-to-alien-magnet-kid.”

Jack cringed. “Just Jack, will do.”

“Okay, Jack-will-do, let’s have a chat, shall we?”
Jack honestly expected to be dragged to the closest interrogation room, or at least some dark, damp office in the corner of the base. Instead, he was surprised when Simmons escorted him off the base, and onto the beach.

It wasn’t long until the yells of personnel and growls of vehicles and the bustle of the base faded, replaced by the murmurs of the ocean. The rhythmic roar of the waves crashing on the white sand was soothing. The salty wind blowing against his face was calming, and it was the first time in a long time the teenager could find himself breathing easy. Even Simmons made an effort to look less intimidating, wearing a Hawaiian shirt and cargo shorts rather than a flashy suit.

However, Jack couldn’t help his stomach knotting when the man pulled out a recording device. The boy hesitantly took it like the cool metal was burning, and as per the agent’s instructions, slipped it over his neck. Simmons reminded him that they could take a break or stop altogether whenever he wanted. The army brat let out a shaky sigh.

“I’m fine,” he insisted. “I can do this.”

“Then start from the beginning.”

Jack doubted Simmons wanted to know how he met the Autobots. It felt like a lifetime ago, anyway. Far too much had happened since then. Instead, he started with the beginning of the nightmare.

That Miko and Jack were left alone at the base, as the other Autobots had gone out on patrols. Arcee and Bulkhead detected a faint energon signal from an abandoned mine, and decided to investigate it. Deeming the children could not be left alone (and from Miko’s nagging insistence), they decided to bring their charges along, not seeing the harm.

Jack described the battle between the Autobots and the Decepticons, the cave-in, and how he was trapped. How he met Megatron.

Simmons did not interrupt him, except when asking to clarify details. He seemed particularly interested in the Lord of the Decepticons, and Jack did his best to describe the tyrant. The former Sector Seven agent seemed fascinated more than anything, as if the boy was telling him things he could never imagine. The army brat supposed he couldn’t blame the man’s surprise. He had spent his career studying Megatron’s anatomy and physiology. Completely unaware of the dangerous, twisted mind that ran it.

The entire interview took hours. They had spent the entire time trailing the beach, going from one end to the island to the other and back again. They paused a few times, either when Jack felt the edges of a panic attack or when Simmons complained to losing his breath. The sun was high when they started and it hung over the ocean when they finished. Jack’s legs were sore, and Simmons rubbing his thighs told the same.

However, the man seemed satisfied, but not in a smug way. That giddy, excited look he greeted the boy was gone, replaced by serious, but intrigued fascination. If anything, he seemed like a scientist or a mathematician finding a solution to a problem they had been working on for years. But he did not say much else, not even muttering a praise for Jack other than expressing his gratitude.

With that, Simmons asked for the recorder and promptly stopped it once it was in his hand. The teenager let out a sigh he wasn’t aware he had been holding.

They trudged back onto the base, both tired and strained. Jack was eager for a warm, hot meal, realizing it was the first time in a long time he had a real appetite. Then a hot shower and a comfortable bed to sleep.
In the late afternoon, the buzz of workers had died a little, as the last of the drills finished and flyers were returned to their hangers. The pair made their way to Hanger E, and sure enough, all of the Autobots were present.

“Well, well, we thought you’ve gotten lost,” Ironhide rumbled, glancing down at them.

“Nope, sorry to disappoint you,” Simmons quipped. As the Autobot snorted, the man turned to Lennox, who had his arms crossed. He handed out the recorder. Only when the lieutenant colonel reached out, Simmons snatched his hand back. “And?”

The NEST commander made a face. The Sector Seven agent raised an expectant eyebrow, and after several long moments, Lennox realized he had no choice.

“Thank you,” he forced out through gritted teeth.

Simmons took it as it was and handed the man hours worth of intel. Jack only gave an amused huff at the exchange and settled by Arcee’s leg. His guardian gave him one of her warm, assuring smiles, and Jack couldn’t help but to mirror.

It was finally over. He could be with his family again. Megatron would never—

Suddenly his thoughts were sliced in half by furious yells. He jumped and snapped his neck back and forth, only to be greeted by roars of engines. He blinked, only to see a line of Humvees with manned turrets appear, forming a tight ring around the Autobots. With weapons trained on the extraterrestrials.

The teenager’s blood turned cold when he heard the sound of Cybertronian weapons being activated. Plating bristled, EM fields flared, wings went up, and pedes shifted into battle stances. Jack yelped as Arcee shoved him behind her, hiding him from the scrutinizing glares of the soldiers. They filed out of the Humvees, stepping as close to the Autobots as they dared. The boy immediately realized they weren’t NEST.

NEST soldiers would never raise a weapon at the Autobots.

“What is the meaning of this?!” Optimus Prime thundered.

“You want a piece of me?!” Ironhide roared.

“I’ll turn you into scrap!” Sideswipe threatened with a wave of his sword when a soldier came threateningly close.

Suddenly soldiers bearing the NEST insignia just as suddenly appeared, forming a rough barrier between the Autobots and the interlopers. Shouts flew in all directions, each party threatening the other, half the gazes and weapons on the Autobots; half of them trained on fellow humans.

Jack cowered in the shadow of his guardian. The Autobots formed a rough ring around him, using their pedes to shield him from the advancing humans. Like they were hiding him. He warily eyed between the dozens of assault rifles trained in his direction and the energon cannons trained towards the invading soldiers.

“Put your weapons down!” Lennox yelled over the bickering shouts, but Jack didn’t know who it was directed to. When his order was unheeded on either side, the boy’s question was answered as the lieutenant colonel stormed forward, slamming his hands on a hood of a Humvee. “I said put them down!”
Suddenly the passenger door of the assaulted vehicle flew open, and Lennox glared at the stern-faced man, dressed in crisp dress uniform, that stepped out. It had been so long since Jack had seen him, it took him several moments to recognize the general he encountered in the Pentagon.

General Bryce.

“Tell them to stand down first,” the head of NEST retorted, glancing at the defensive aliens.

“Sir, these are our allies!”

General Bryce only shook his head. “There’s nothing I can do, Colonel. Talk to him.”

Both Lennox and Jack squinted in confusion, until another figure crawled out of the Humvee, stepping forward. While the teenager’s confusion only grew, the lieutenant colonel bristled.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he snarled venomously.

Theodore Galloway didn’t even flinch, responding with a furious glare of his own.

“I’m here to tell you that your NEST team is deactivated.”

He wasn’t sure if he heard the man in the flashy suit. Deactivated? No, that couldn’t mean—

The government official went on, “The Autobots are to remained in Diego Garcia—pending further orders.”

“No, we take our orders from General Bryce,” Lennox growled harshly, stepping forward until he was only a matter of inches away from the government official.

Standing each other up, their physique couldn’t be more opposite. The NEST commander towered almost a head over the stranger, and almost twice as broad, with solid, defined muscles. The government official meanwhile was short and lanky, his black blazer adding a layer of weight. The lieutenant colonel glanced at his superior.

“There’s nothing I can do,” the general frowned. At Lennox’s baffled look, the government official fished a wad of papers from his inner pocket.

“I will take your General of the Army, and raise you one President of the United States.”

He forced the papers into the NEST commander’s hand. Lennox forced them open and skimmed through.

“You’re making a mistake,” Lennox gasped, vigorously shaking his head.

“No, you did, when you botched up years of CIA undercover work,” the stranger spat back, pointing an accusing finger. “And that’s not the even the main issue.”

Completely ignoring the mountain of a man in front of him, the government official stormed toward Optimus Prime. The Autobot leader had not raised a weapon during the entire exchange, but he looked down upon the man with a stern glare.

“No human causalities! That was our agreement!” the stranger shouted up at him.

“An agreement that we upheld,” the Prime replied patiently. “We did not violently engage with any of the insurgents.”
“Yeah, well I have fourteen names that say otherwise!”

“Terrorists,” Epps corrected, without glancing over, still holding his rifle in a vice grip.

“And twelve American soldiers. Oh, and let’s not forget the criminal mastermind that you let get away!”

“MECH was hoarding Cybertronian technology—we had jurisdiction to be there,” Lennox argued.

“I’m sorry to interrupt your lovely conversation,” Simmons interrupted, hands still raised in the air, “but Johny over there is still pointing a very big gun at me. Civil War ended a hundred years ago. Can we please put the weapons down?”

“Only if Johny puts his gun down first,” Epps retorted.

“Only if you turn your robots off,” one of the invading soldiers snapped.

Jack heard metallic growls above him, the autonomous robotic beings not appreciating the demeaning wording. Then he heard a heavy sigh.

“Autobots, stand down,” Optimus Prime ordered.

His subordinates promptly obeyed his command, though not without sending cold glares to the hostile humans. Jack shuddered and pressed himself against Arcee’s leg. He thought he felt a comforting servo on his shoulder. It was then, one-by-one, each soldier lowered his gun, followed by the NEST soldiers.

“Much better,” Simmons sighed. He instantly lowered his hands and sauntered over to the government official. “Now, I didn’t catch your name, Mister…?”

“Theodore Galloway, security advisor to the President,” the man retorted. “Who are you supposed to be?”

“Seymour Simmons. I’m a consultant from Sector Seven—”

“Sector Seven is disbanded.”

“Yes, but—”

Simmons explanation was cut off by a furious screech.

“Let me go, you jerk!”

It like a lead had fallen into Jack’s stomach as he watched a burly soldier walk out of the hanger, dragging a struggling Miko behind him. He pulled at her arm as she flailed and shouted. Raf was much more obediently by his own guard, an unhappy Fowler trailing behind them. Then the Japanese girl took in the convoy holding the Autobots prisoner and promptly cursed in her mother tongue.

“Jack, what’s going on?” she cried.

The army brat automatically ducked, but it was too late. Galloway’s baffled gaze settled on his form, which looked miniscule next to the giants. Instantly the security advisor’s eyes growing to the size of dinner plates.

“What the hell is this?” he shouted.
“They are under our protective custody—” Lennox tried.

“This is unacceptable! How long has this been going on?” When Lennox tried again, Galloway dropped his voice to a vicious hiss, “We cannot entrust national security to children, unless I missed a policy paper somewhere.”

Jack felt himself bristling and even opened his mouth to correct the man, but Arcee clasped his shoulder in warning. However, he couldn’t stay under his guardian’s protection as Galloway pointed a sharp finger at him.

“You, here, now,” the security advisor ordered, pointing at the ground next to his feet.

Instantly Jack felt defiance flare in his chest. He wasn’t some like misbehaving toddler who got caught with his hand in the cookie jar. He was chosen, by Optimus Prime and Meg—

Noticing the multiple stares boring into him, the army brat realized he had no choice. With a sigh, he stepped forward, settling because Miko and Raf underneath Galloway’s scrutinizing glare. He demanded their names, and the teenager complied. Miko was silent.

“I asked for your name, little girl,” Galloway demanded.

“…..Miko.”

“Miko what?”


“Mind telling me what you’re doing with classified US military assets?”

It was the Japanese girl’s turn to get offended. “They’re our part—”

“They were attacked by Decepticons,” Lennox stepped in quickly. “We had no choice but to bring them in—”

Galloway was already bored with his excuse, instead rounding on Fowler. “Why didn’t you report this?”

“I report Autobot activity,” the liaison answered quickly.

“Oh, and there’s also a paper that says a bunch of teenagers having playdates with the Autobots is an exception to Autobot activity.”

Fowler frowned and defensively crossed his arms. “They’re kids—”

“Kids that have no permission to be here and could possibly leak critical intel if they haven’t already.”

“We’re not kids,” Jack corrected.

“Quiet,” Galloway snapped, glaring at him.

Miko merely glared back in a defiant pout, arms over her chest. Jack narrowed his eyes at the man. He didn’t like this government official at all. But it wasn’t the same instant dislike he felt for Megatron or Silas or even Vince. Galloway wasn’t a tyrant or a lunatic or a bully, but he was just as dangerous. He saw himself in the right, regardless of who else told him. Now Galloway had his undivided attention on Agent Fowler, only a matter of inches between them.
“You disobeyed direct orders,” the man accused in a low tone, as if he was trying to have a secret conversation in the middle of over two dozen stares. “Report Autobot activity and speak on our behalf. Instead, you withhold information, let them directly violate the treaty—and helped them do it—all the while, hacking into unauthorized files.”

Fowler shrugged. “No one would answer my calls.”

Simmons choked on a laugh, but quickly silenced at Galloway’s scathing glare. The government official turned his attention back to the liaison.

“Not going to defend yourself?” the security advisor invited.

“Not when my actions were in not only the American government’s interests, but the humanity’s. Besides, I left the Army over a decade ago. You can’t have me court martialed.”

“No, I can’t,” Galloway agreed, but his tone was far too cold for Jack’s liking.

Suddenly the man flicked his wrist and a burly man stepped forward. The teenager suddenly heard a familiar clicking sound. Cuffs clasped on Fowler’s wrists, arms painfully wrenched behind back.

“But I can have you arrested.”

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**Next chapter: The fate of NEST and Megatron finally returns for the grand finale!**

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Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: the fate of NEST and Megatron returns for the grand finale!
Whatever protest that was on Jack’s tongue was drowned out by the bellow of the Autobots. There were furious stomps as several of the Autobots moved forward, only to draw back by the clicking of guns and yells. Of course, that triggered another round of banter, soldiers directing focus at each other, instead of the cuffs around Fowler’s wrists as he was tugged away.

“W-wait!” Jack cried.

“You can’t do that!” Miko protested.

“Leave him alone!” Raf wailed.

“Under what charges?!” Fowler demanded, hard eyes narrowing to a furious glare.

“Let’s start with interfering with a federal investigation,” Galloway decided. “And maybe if the judge decides to give you some slack, you won’t be arrested for treason.”

“This is completely—“ Lennox started, charging forward, only for the security advisor to round on him.

“You are a petty man,” the liaison hissed.

“You have the right to remain silent,” Galloway retorted. When the agent only glared, he added, “A dozen American soldiers are dead and the world’s greatest lunatic is lost to the wind. Someone is to blame. All signs point to you.”

Jack swallowed. Fowler was the liaison between the Autobots and the American government. It was his duty to mediate between the two sides, but it was clear his loyalty was expected to his country first. Instead, he chosen the Autobots. The teenager’s stomach twisted as he processed Galloway’s accusations. Lennox was able to form a frontal assault in a matter of hours, when such an operation should have taken weeks of planning at the very least. Unless—

Megatron had sent Jack to the Pentagon to steal secrets from Sector Seven. NEST sent Fowler to steal information from the CIA. It only made sense that the spy agency had been eying the terrorist organization, and maybe knew more than NEST, and was merely waiting for the right opportunity to strike. It was because of that military intel Lennox was able to get a rough idea of Silas’s operation, and how to confront it.

The burly soldier pulled at Fowler away, further from the Autobots. The federal agent growled, but complied to his captor’s demands. More stomps and even Jack moved, as if there was something he could do. Fowler noticed.

“I’ll be fine,” the government agent huffed, almost dismissively, despite the look in his eyes. “This isn’t my first rodeo.”
The hairs on the back of his neck stood up as the air buzzed with the energy of distressed EM fields. The boy glanced at Lennox.

“Can’t you do anything?” he demanded.

The lieutenant colonel looked torn, glancing between one of his oldest friends and the man that had the power to destroy his life with a snap of his fingers. He swallowed thickly.

“My hands are tied…” Lennox confessed lowly.

Jack’s eyes widened in dismay. For the longest time, the army brat didn’t know what to make of Fowler. The liaison was always guarded, save for his famous outbursts against the ‘Bots, along his open hatred of the Decepticons and of course, his patriotism for his country. Other than that, Jack didn’t know anything about the man. It was as if the agent was careful, not only to reveal his personal life, but his agenda. There was a time the army brat was wary of Fowler.

But that dissolved quickly. Fowler helped Bumblebee and Optimus Prime defeat Skyquake. He accompanied the ‘Bots in transporting the DINGUS, when he could have let someone else do it. He went to the other side of the world to bail Miko out of prison. He saved Jack, and his mother, and Arcee, when he brought NEST forces to drive off Airachnid, to drive off MECH. Fowler saved the teenager again from the organization’s cold clutches, and he was paying the price for it.

William Fowler wasn’t just a figurehead for the American government. He was an Autobot.

Jack could only swallow painfully as the man was guided away.

“There has been a misunderstanding,” Optimus Prime’s calm, but stern voice drifted over the humans. “Agent Fowler has committed no crime against the treaty.”

“No, but he has committed crimes against the US government,” Galloway retorted. “And he must answer to our laws.”

“Even if the alliance has not been broken?”

“As far as we are concerned? The treaty is void,” the security advisory practically hissed.

“This fool is terribly misinformed,” Ratchet muttered. The Autobot leader was more patient than his medic.

“How are we to rectify this situation?”

“Let us do our job—our way,” Galloway replied hostility.

“It was not my intention to insult your government. But MECH was a threat to the Autobot cause and was responsible for the theft of our weaponry. That was a direction violation of our agreement.”

“And you broke our trust by going behind our backs. How can we trust you, if to you have our men pay the price your irresponsibility?”

Jack felt his hands balling into fists. Optimus was reaching to a solution, but Galloway dismissed each word like the mech was that troublesome student in the back of the class. Not the legendary leader of an entire alien race.

“You and your friends, stay in Diego Garcia, until we have enough reason to believe you again,” Galloway decided.
“Very well,” Optimus replied shortly. “But inform your leaders as you contain us, you allow the Decepticons to gain the advantage.”

“We can handle them.”

“And what if you’re wrong?”

Galloway gave the Autobot leader a look. “For someone who preaches a lot about potential, who underestimate us humans.”

Optimus narrowed his optics, and it took Jack to realize the Prime was offended by the jab. But rather than edge the erratic man further, the Guardian Knight seemed to gather what was left of his patience and stood back to his full height. Then Jack froze defensively as Galloway finally turned his attention back to the teenagers.

“Colonel Lennox, see to it these kids are escorted off base immediately.”

The teenagers protested at the same time.

“You can’t!” Miko wailed.

“The Autobots are our guardians,” Jack tried to reason.

“It's their job to protect us!” Raf added.

“Their job is to repel Decepticon activity,” Galloway retorted. “They’re weapons, not toys.”

“No!” the distraught girl screeched. “You can't take Bulkhead away!”

Galloway only rolled his eyes, but before he could retort, Miko tore away from the group. She closed the distance between her and her guardian in a heartbeat. Bulkhead leaned down at her approach, lowering a servo so she could trap one of his fingers in a bear hug.

“You bast—” Jack hissed, lunging forward, only for Simmons to halt him with a strong hand on his chest. The teenager ignored him. “They’re our friends!”

“Optimus, please, tell him!” Miko begged.

“The children are correct,” the Autobot leader mused. “They are under our custody.”

“They are American citizens,” Galloway argued. “They are our custody.”

“I’m not!” the exchange student protested, but she was ignored.

“And now, they are trespassing. A military base is no place for a bunch of kids.” Galloway had suddenly taken a diplomatic tone, gesturing to the teenagers, and Jack almost tore past Simmons. “There are too many dangers here. They should be in school, safe. Worrying about grades and relationships, not being run over by Humvees or stepped on by… you.”

Jack wanted to tell the man he had tried to leave the Autobots. It was exactly what Megatron wanted. The teenagers to be isolated from their guardians, so the Decepticons could directly focus on their adversaries, or have a clear shot at the Autobots’ pets.

Optimus Prime narrowed his optics, and Jack could practically see the gears turning in his head. He wondered what the Autobot leader was thinking.
The Autobot leader had taken the children in his custody for their protection, yet they had been dragged into a war that was not theirs. How many times had they almost been killed? Even with his argument, in reality, Optimus had no real claim over them. To do such would be an insult to the race that agreed to host his kind. With the ice that supported the alliance so thin, not even the Guardian Knight was willing to step on it.

“…I understand,” Optimus decided, his voice slow and reluctant.

“That’s it?” Miko screamed. “After everything we’ve been through together?!?”

“Miko…” Bulkhead tried, but the girl cut him off.

“What about our freedom to choose?!”

“It may fly where they come from, but not on Earth,” Galloway interrupted, impatience dripping from his voice. He turned to Lennox. “Colonel, get them off my island, now.”

The lieutenant colonel remained in his spot, that torn expression still there. He opened his mouth, but no words came out. It was the first time Jack had seen a military commander speechless. Unable to follow the command of his superior.

Another figure stepped in.

“Ratchet, fire up a groundbridge, if you will,” General Bryce ordered, using an eerily calm voice, dripping with authority. “I think these kids have had a long day.”

The medic frowned at the human. The old Autobot only took orders from his Prime, not a mere human. Optimus repeated the command. Ratchet let out a heavy sigh. He looked down at the teenagers, his optics dim, in a soft, pitiful expression. It wasn’t that famous scowl. It looked displaced, wrong. All of this felt wrong. Suddenly a servo was on Jack’s shoulder.

“It’s alright, Jack,” Arcee murmured softly, so low the boy hardly heard her. She was looming right above him. “It’s for your safety.”

The teenager shook his head furiously as he turned to face his partner. He didn’t realize his voice cracked as he said, “I don’t want to go…”

The Autobot gave one of her rare, warm smiles. One that told him that everything was going to be okay. That they were partners, and she would protect him. Always. Arcee leaned down, so Jack could look into those brilliant electric-blue eyes. Warm, smooth metal cupped his cheek. A gentle finger brushed away a tear he had not realized had fallen.

“You will always be my partner,” Arcee whispered.

Jack couldn’t help himself. He lunged forward to wrap his arms around her thick neck, burying his face into her shoulder. The words came out before he could process them.

“I love you, Arcee.”

His best friend merely returned the embrace with a tight and secure one of her own. It was soft and gentle at the same time, careful not hurt him. A comforting servo stroked his back, soothingly, as Arcee murmured assurances in his ear.

Suddenly a warm, soft hand tentatively touched his back.
“Jack, we have to go,” Mom murmured, gently, carefully.

Sure enough, the hum of the groundbridge told the truth behind her words. Something in his chest tightened in a horrible way. The boy practically had to be pried from Arcee’s hold. He watched the world turn into a fog, depending on his mother’s touch to guide him. Raf and Miko fared no better.

Bumblebee cradled a sobbing Raf in both of his servos, wings drooping as he deposited his charge by the swirling vortex. Bulkhead had to do the same with Miko, but instead of handling a limb child, he wrestled with a raving beast. The Japanese girl kicked and punched as she screamed and shrieked at the top of her lungs, cursing out NEST, her guardian, and the unfairness of it all. She was still going even as Bulkhead placed her on the ground.

Jack turned. He took in the sight of every one of them. Every memory, every picture, every moment he had shared with them for over the last year, flashed before his eyes. Of his friends. Of his protectors. Of his family.

He took in every single detail, ingraining it forever in his mind. Knowing it would be his last. He would never forget them. Jack would never forget her.

The children stepped through the groundbridge.

Jack didn’t cry. He fully expected to, but nothing every came. The awful, agonizing feeling in his chest prevented any noise, any tear, any cry from escaping. He merely collapsed on his bed. He instantly felt heaviness settle into every fiber of his body, effectively cementing him to the mattress. The teenager didn’t rave or scream or protest like Miko. He didn’t cry or sob or wail like Raf. He merely closed his eyes, and let the deep, empty void of sleep take him.

Mom had woken him several times, whispering things to him he didn’t understand. The army brat figured she was trying to coax him out of bed, but he didn’t have the energy to lift a finger.

Jack didn’t eat. He couldn’t. Every time he looked at a hot meal, or even thought of one, it felt like something tore at his stomach. He didn’t drink. He had no desire to, even as his mouth went dry and a foul taste coated his tongue. He didn’t care.

His veins that had been running hot for days, were suddenly cold. Jack felt an uncomfortable itch throughout his body. It wasn’t the skin, but underneath. It was deep within, craving something to fill him again, regardless of how dark it may be.

When he slept, it was restless. Almost every night, he closed his eyes, only to see burning skyscrapers, gunfire, and crimson eyes. Jack would bolt upright, screaming her name. She never came, never answered. And the boy would realize it wasn’t just a bad dream.

Jack couldn’t remember when he woke up. He couldn’t remember when he got out of bed. Or how he got to school.

Part of him realized it had only been a matter of days since he had last visited Jasper High. Instead, it felt like three years ago, when he had stepped into the halls for the first time. Jack’s skin prickled at the number of stares that bore into him, whispers and sneers following him wherever he went. At first, he didn’t understand.

Then he found Sierra, in homeroom. She gasped at his arrival and instantly her friends formed a wall between him and the girl. Then Jack remembered. He wanted to talk to her, to tell her how sorry he
was, to explain it wasn’t him. But looking into that gaze, he realized he couldn’t. At least Vince was leaving him alone.

Jack tried to flee the scrutinizing eyes at lunch, but he still couldn’t escape. Raf kept shivering even though it wasn’t cold. Miko’s eyes were red and puffy. They talked idly, about anything that came to mind, trying to act like nothing had happened. Even though the object of most of their conversations had been ripped away.

Jack couldn’t focus on any of his classes. The teachers spoke in garbles and his texts were in an alien language. He couldn’t remember anything. His grades dropped and there was a letter he saw more than most. He didn’t care.

Jack didn’t know how long had passed. A week? Maybe two. Days blurred together. The junior hardly registered the shrill ringing of the bell. The last one of the week, a sound that usually filled him with joy and relief. Instead it only gave him dread and anxiety.

The army brat was trudging to his locker when it happened. A rough, ugly sound erupted from his throat. He immediately swallowed it down and almost put a hand over his mouth. He practically ran the rest of the distance, ripping out his books and slamming the steel door shut.

He found his bicycle, somehow. He wanted to throw it away every time he looked at it. A sorry replacement, and more importantly, it wasn’t her. Instead he jumped on it and pedaled as fast as his legs would allow. It was slow. So slow. And so it took far too long.

Jack was gasping for air by the time he barged through the front door of his home. His legs hurt, oh, did they hurt. His entire body was shaking. Sweat had his long sleeves stick to his skin. His face felt wet. Another harsh sounded bubbled up from his throat, as he felt the walls of his home close in around him.

Mom was home, for a change. She started working with the new head physician tomorrow. Jack threw his backpack in his room and tore the keys from the wall. He told her he was going to the store, keeping his voice even enough that she believed him. Thank God she was in the other room.

The teenager didn’t remember the drive. It all went by in a numb blur, the arid, empty landscape never registering. Maybe because he gone here so often, he didn’t need to. Or maybe he just didn’t care.

Autobot Outpost Omega One was cold and empty. For the first time he had even seen it, it was dark. Not a single light was on, not even the emergency lights. Jack almost rammed the car into the unmoving husk of a Vehicon. They littered the floor, now grey and frigid. The pools of energon had dried into an unnatural, ugly color.

Deep groves and skid marks covered the floor. Scorch marks were everywhere, left behind by stray shots of energon. A couple of the catwalks had collapsed and the elevator shaft had hole in one of the concrete walls. The computer console that took up the main lobby was utterly destroyed. Its giant screens were black and lifeless, the webs of cracks spreading across it. The controls themselves were fried and dented. The groundbridge remained cold and lifeless.

Jack had parked the car at the tunnel’s entrance, as far away from the fallen Decepticons as possible. He slowly and carefully ascended the staircase he had stepped on a daily basis. In the darkness of the outpost, it felt completely foreign, especially as it rattled and wobbled with each step. Obviously it had been damaged during the fight, but it held his weight.

The upper level wasn’t much better. The army brat confirmed the computer was totaled, and so was
the little corner he and others set up. The hours they had spent there, laughing and shouting and talking. The TV was gone, the gaming console was destroyed, and all that was left of the couch was a pile of shredded pleather. Jack paused in the ruins of what was once the Autobot base and swallowed, which was loud in his ears. It was then he realized how quiet it was.

No blaring of metal bands or shouts of Miko. No tapping of Raf on his computer, or the little revs of his favorite toy car. No stomping of pedes, metallic thuds, or grinding of gears. He didn’t hear the grumbles or mutterings of Ratchet, the bellows and laughs of Bulkhead, the buzzes and whirs of Bumblebee. The deep, echoing voice of Optimus Prime was gone.

Arcee was gone.

Jack let out around rasp. Suddenly his body felt heavy, his knees unable to bear the weight it. He collapsed onto his knees, not bothering to catch himself. He couldn’t, not with how the world spun around him, turning upside down into a horrible, hellish reality.

He felt a hole tear open his heart, reopened from the death of his father.

Soldiers don’t cry.

Jack cried.

In the silence of the base, the teenager didn’t bother to hide the ugly sobs from deep within his chest. He wailed and screamed as loud as he could, as if he expected something hear him, but it merely hurt his raw throat instead. His lungs desperately tried to fill with air, only for a harsh cry to interrupt each time, resulting in a weird, distorted hiccup.

His vision clouded over. Tears sprung from his burning eyes and he felt them trailing down his cheek, dripping from his chin. The boy trembled violently, and the air chilled. He brought his knees to his chest, wrapping his arms around his legs. The military brat buried his face in his knees, but it did little to muffle the violent sounds.

“Jack…”

Jack froze, the next sob dying in his throat as he jolted at the deep voice.

A voice he never wanted to hear again. A voice that had only brought him pain and suffering and never cared for anything else.

The teenager turned, slowly, cautiously, glancing over to see a familiar figure. He was in his shrunken size again, only a matter of feet away from Jack, as if to keep a careful distance.

Megatron.

The Decepticon warlord’s expression was inscrutable, his faceplates betraying no emotion as he peered at the distraught boy. It made Jack sick. He felt that hot, burning rage well up in his chest like lava from a volcano. It spread to his limbs, filling his entire being. Jack jumped to his feet in an instant, whirling around to face the devil himself.

“Y-You…” No word, no insult, was strong enough to describe the murderer. Jack marched towards the shrunken titan, body rigid and quivering. He rose his voice a high-pitched scream. “You killed my FATHER!”

Megatron merely curled his lip. “I did no such thing. I was being held captive by your kind, remember?”
“The Decepticons attacked the base to hack into the military! To find information about you! Dad died because of you!”

Jack’s voice became a higher and higher octave with each sentence. Megatron didn’t even react to the violent outburst, merely looking down at the human with an impassive expression. A flicker of optics was the only betrayal of surprise he may have had, but it was done far too lazily to be sincere.

Jack think he went for the punch. Suddenly cold, unrelenting claws wrapped around his wrist. With a screech, the army brat sent another blow, only for Megatron to block it just as easily. If he was calmer, he would be rational enough to know it was foolish. The fragile bone of his hand would shatter against the invincible armor, if the warlord didn’t snap his neck outright. Being thwarted did nothing, as Jack screamed and flailed.

“Enough.”

Suddenly the world panned. The teenager didn’t know if he was thrown or Megatron merely let go. He landed on his back, staring at the rafters far above. He quickly rose to his elbows.

Sure enough, Megatron hadn’t moved from his spot, but his optics had narrowed in the slightest degree. His lack of expression infuriated Jack, who bared his fangs, snarling like a vicious animal.

“I will not apologize for something I had no control over,” the Decepticon leader announced. “Especially if it was deserved.”

“Deserved?” Jack’s voice cracked at the octave he managed to hit. “Dad didn’t know you existed!”

Megatron snarled. “All the more reason.”

Suddenly all the things Jack had been told came rushing back. Megatron gained fame and power by slaying countless others to become the Champion of Kaon. He used the adoring crowd to gain his freedom, and twisted those same minds to do his bidding. He convinced half a planet to go to war, just because he thought he deserved to own a title that was not his. And Cybertron was destroyed because of it.

The tyrant’s bloodlust was a result of his own delusions, his own twisted sense of reality. It wasn’t until now Jack finally understood.

Megatron was insane.

“What was I, then?” the teenager demanded. “I didn’t know about you, yet you kidnapped me, tortured me, stalked me! Was it all just a game to you?”

Maybe it wasn’t enough for Megatron to destroy his enemy, but to seduce his son. A twisted sense of vengeance of the race that captured and humiliated him. Of course, the Decepticon revealed nothing, except—

“You are upset with me.”

“No shit!”

“You think I abandoned you.”

The blunt statement made Jack flinch, catching him off guard. He opened his mouth to tell Megatron he was wrong. He was happy the dictator was gone for so long, and he wished that he would stay away. Instead, the human felt something twist at the words.
The Decepticon leader had to have known what was happening. That MECH wanted to hurt him, did hurt him. After everything Megatron went through to stake his claim on his precious little pet, going as far as to poison him with dark energon, yet the warlord hadn’t even raised a claw.

Jack gritted his teeth, the rage spitting out the words before he could stop it. His voice cracked, but he hardly noticed. “I begged you!”

“I will not be summoned.”

Jack blinked in shock. For a full thirty seconds, he couldn’t process the words. Then—

“Your ego’s that big?! That’s why?!”

“I answered you. Or did you fight that wretched human all by yourself?”

The teenager seethed. He couldn’t count that. It wasn’t Megatron stepping in to help him. He had merely used the bond to force his bloodlust upon Jack, coercing the army brat to defend himself. Going as far as to—

“You tried to make me kill him,” the human accused.

“You fought me,” Megatron retorted.

“I’m not you!” His voice rose back into a yell. “I’m not a murderer! I’m not a monster!” He shook his head. “You won’t make me. You won’t turn me into you.”

Suddenly a noise grated against Jack’s ear. It sounded like rocks clapping against each other. It took him a few seconds to register it as the Decepticon’s laughter. He glared at the tyrant’s amused expression. Jack was totally serious, yet Megatron acted like he said a joke.

“Is that why you act so stubborn?” the sterling titan mused. “Because you can’t stand to be like another?”

“I’m nothing like you,” Jack growled. “The dark energon is gone. We don’t have anything between us anymore.”

Megatron narrowed his optics and frowned. “Oh?”

Crimson orbs flashed purple.

Without warning, a tidal wave of darkness washed over Jack’s mind. He winced with a choked sound at the pressure the filled his skull, pushing aside thoughts, logic, and emotion like it was nothing. The boy felt something wrap around his heart, tugging at it, as a familiar warmth filled his body. A familiar high tingled his senses.

No.

Nonono—

“You feel it, don’t you?” Megatron rumbled. Suddenly the tyrant splayed his fingers across Jack’s chest. “The power of Unicron within you?”

“B-But—” Jack tried, but the train of thought was shoved away by the dark presence.

“It’s a part of you, now. Not just in blood or in your heart, but the darkness of your soul. It cannot to removed.”
The teenager felt a shudder course through his body—*feeling* the truth in his very veins. The servo slid down, seizing his wrist yet again. Jack almost screamed when suddenly his palm was pressed against warm, smooth metal, against the Decepticon insignia. He felt something underneath the armor, thrumming against his fingertips as it spread across the metal. It was a steady, pulsing rhythm, not unlike his own heartbeat.

Suddenly Megatron’s voice gained an odd, metallic twang, but still as menacing as ever. “The lifeblood of the Chaos Bringer runs through us both. We share the same destiny, now, the same fate. We are the same.”

Jack shook his head, as if it could make the hued, warped vision disappear. He spoke, but it sounded like another’s voice. “No. No!” He gritted his teeth, trying to shove the flurry of emotions he did not want to have. “I don’t want anything to do with you!”

“You would have not called for me if that was true. You would not be here now.” When the boy just shut his eyes, trying to ignore the silver-tongued monster’s words. Megatron dropped his voice to a low purr. “You know it, Jack. You know the blood-bond between us, don’t you?”

Jack opened his mouth, wanting to refuse, but then he realized. Deep, grating noises of buzzes and whirrs had sounded against his ear, yet he had thought little of it. He had *understood* it.

“What the frag—”

The human screamed. He ripped his wrist from the Decepticon’s grip and covered his mouth with his hands. All the while a flare of tainted optics was the only betrayal of Megatron’s amusement. It took several times before Jack spoke without a weird, rough, *unnatural* noise coming from is throat.

“W-what did you do to me?!” the human screamed, his shaking increasing tenfold.

He didn’t just understand it. He was *speaking* it.

He was speaking Cybertronian.

There was a flash of deadly fangs. “*We are one, you and I.*”

Jack was still gripping his throat, only to feel his heart hammering underneath his skin. It wasn’t possible. It wasn’t *physically* possible. He tried to find any logical reason. Megatron had invaded his mind, and he had entered the warlord’s. Had the ancient being’s knowledge somehow bled into him? Or was it the dark energon? Had it seeped into his existence, so much that it *altered* his body?

Suddenly the darkness pressed against him. He felt it shove down his panic—his fear—at the foreign instinct. Until only the dark presence remained. He jumped when suddenly servos wrapped around his arms, gently tugging them down. Warm metal cupped his cheek.

“Do you see now, my dear?” Megatron whispered, thankfully switching back to English for the little sanity the boy had left.

“No, I don’t!” Jack retorted in another harsh yell, slapping the servo away. “Just like that, you want to forget everything you’ve done? You hurt me, my friends, my family! Dad is dead because of you! Arcee is gone because of you!”

With that final scream, the teenager tried to pry away from the Decepticon’s claws. Only for the possessive grip to remain firm. Jack only pulled harder, even though he was aware it would only reward him with a dislocated shoulder.
“Let me go!”
“No.”

The single syllable was spoken like a command. Without warning, Megatron pulled, and Jack was sent into a solid frame. Thick, unrelenting arms wrapped around his back, keeping him in place. The military brat shrieked in protest and flailed against his prison.

“I said let me go!” When his command was unheeded, he continued to rant, “I hate you!”

With that, Jack increased his struggles, but it was hopeless. Megatron never let him go, never flinched, no matter how hard the human pounded against his chest or how loud he screeched. He cursed the warlord’s name, how much he hated him, how he was wrong. The teenager didn’t realize the tears had returned, streaming down his face as his voice broke from the strain of his screaming.

Jack didn’t know long his fit lasted. Maybe a few seconds or a few minutes. It felt like hours. Finally a wave of exhaustion washed over him, extinguishing the fury. His muscles burned with protest as the energy left them. The boy slumped in the Decepticon’s hold, his head falling against Megatron’s chest. The metal pulsed against his ear. Jack panted, closing his eyes.

“Just kill me already,” he murmured, but didn’t have the heat he wanted.

“You’re far too valuable to dispose,” Megatron argued.

“How? The Autobots are gone now.” Jack felt something in his chest break at the realization. “I’m useless to you.”

“Because the Autobots made you useless. They saw you as an insignificant child. But I have seen through your eyes. I have felt everything you have ever experienced. You are different from the rest of your kind. You are brave, and clever, and strong. You are compassionate but you hate those who have wronged you, as you should. You would do anything to uphold your beliefs, no matter what is in your way.”

Megatron’s claws stroked through his hair as he spoke. Jack didn’t protest the petting, or refute the tyrant’s words. He no longer had the energy to argue, nor did he know how. Not when he heard the real praise behind the words, and not just whispered lies in his ear.

The boy closed his eyes. He just wanted to go to asleep, and forget everything that had happened. He didn’t even realize he was leaning against the Decepticon, until Megatron adjusted his hold.

One arm wrapped around Jack’s shoulders and the other slipped under his knees. He was lifted into the air as if he weighed nothing. The teenager hid in his face in the warlord’s shoulder, not caring that his tears trailed down on the armor. The world rocked back and forth in slow, measured strides.

Jack must had dozed off, because he just aware of plush around him. He still saw the dark rafters above him, and he realized he was on one of the cots in the base. He saw movement above him and a rough, but warm blanket was pulled over him. The frame creaked as a heavy weight settled on the edge.

“I still won’t forgive you,” Jack whispered.

“I know,” Megatron replied.

The teenager closed his eyes, feeling the edges of unconscious creep forward. He tried to sink into it,
only for a sharp, metallic sound to pierce his hearing.

The boy jumped, alert. He shot into a sitting position, only for his heart to leap to his throat at the sight of Megatron’s sword glinting in the darkness. Despite the warlord’s words, he felt panic rise. He really was going to do it—

Instead, Jack watched in shock as Megatron turned the blade and sliced it across his own wrist. Sure enough, dark energon oozed from the wound. The deep itch returned, far worse than before.

“Drink, my little one.”

It was still harsh and bitter, burning down his throat, but it didn’t have that poisonous taste as before. It was the first time in weeks that Jack felt full and energy coursed through his body. The void within him sealed close. He felt anxiety and fear and anguish in his heart be pushed away as Megatron’s will filled the bond between them.

Suddenly he felt a strong arm wrap around him, gently guiding him back down. He was pressed against a hot frame. Jack leaned against it until he heard the thrumming of Megatron’s spark underneath him, the sound sickeningly comforting. The boy closed his eyes with a sigh, feeling a strong, dominating presence wash over him. Claws brushed down his spine, deceptively soft and gentle.

“I will never abandon you, my Jack,” Megatron whispered in his ear. “You are mine, and mine alone. For all of time.”

Jack fell into darkness in the master’s arms.

Chapter End Notes

The end.
Story’s over. No more fanfiction. The rest is up to your interpretation.
Haha, just joking. Yes, I am fully planning on making a sequel. It will be loosely based on the first half of season 2, and will have plenty of familiar faces.
However, you’re going to have to wait a little while.
I have a couple other projects I wish to finish before dedicating my entire writing to it, because I got carried away with this one.
A huge, huge thanks to everyone that followed this story. It really inspires my writing and I’m so grateful the support. I hope to see you guys again and follow this journey.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!